

The Long-Term Effects of Workplace Bullying on Health, Wellbeing, and on the Professional and Personal Lives of Bully-victims

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Abstract

One of the aims of this study was to give a voice to the victims of workplace bullying (WPB). Narratives or stories told by the victims allow researchers to better understand, challenge, and update outdated thinking of WPB. This paper identifies gaps in the literature regarding the long-term consequences of WPB on workers' health and wellbeing, and how this impacts their professional and personal lives. The findings of this paper are based on a qualitative study that documented individual experiences of six WPB victims. Analysis of the findings shows how deeply rooted the issue of WPB is, opens conversations, highlights possible causes, and redefines solutions. Reflecting on Aotearoa New Zealand's *laissez-faire* attitude towards WPB as well as realising the need for anti-bullying strategies, clearer guidelines, and the promotion of interventions to support employees, this study raises the awareness of the long-term consequences of WPB and its impact on victims and society.

Keywords: workplace bullying; wellbeing; mental health; violence; personal stories; long-term consequences.

Introduction

Workplace bullying (WPB) is an issue facing many workplaces across the world. In Aotearoa New Zealand, WPB presents a significant problem for mental wellbeing among employees, according to both the Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand

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Ethical approval

All participants in this study provided written informed consent. This study was approved by the Southern Institute of Technology ethics committee in Invercargill, dated 31st July 2019.

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(MHF) and the Health and Safety Association New Zealand (HSANZ) (MHF, 2021). Indeed, the two surveys, the Survey of Working Life (2018)¹ and the 2011 New Zealand Workplace Violence Survey, illustrate that New Zealand has moderately high levels of workplace violence by international standards (Bentley et al., 2011). Moreover, according to the recent survey by Mental Health Foundation, 41.2 per cent of the New Zealand workforce reported WPB (MHF, 2021). However, O’Driscoll (2012) suggests that there are likely even more incidents of workplace bullying in New Zealand but there is not enough research or data available on that topic.

Researchers agree that not only is WPB a widespread problem, but also that it has severe negative outcomes of WPB (Salin, 2003; Gardner et al. 2016; Gardner et al., 2020; Gardner et al., 2013); it is linked to stress, violence, and aggression in a number of ways (Barling et al., 2009; Sisley et al., 2010) and differs from workplace conflict both in frequency and longevity (Salin, 2003). More devastating and crippling for individuals than any other kind of work-related stress, WPB is more than ‘harmless fun’ or ‘tough management’ (Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2003; Chambers & Frampton, 2017). Described as a gradual and harmful experience where the bully repeatedly manipulates and destabilises another employee’s professional and personal standing, WPB affects employees and organisations (Foster et al., 2004; Scott et al., 2008). Reported as an everyday occurrence in some industries (Bentley et al., 2013), WPB creates extremes of social stress and remains a health and safety risk for workers (Hutchinson et al., 2006; Michelson, 2001; Bentley et al., 2009).

To date, research on WPB has focused heavily on the short-term consequences during periods of employment (high absenteeism, decreased commitment and productivity, low job satisfaction, psychosomatic symptoms, physical illness etc). However, to fully engage and understand the long-term effects of WPB on health and wellbeing, more qualitative research is required, including longitudinal and gender-based studies as well as studies incorporating employed and previously employed individuals (Salin, 2003; Einarsen, et al., 2011; Carbo & Hughes, 2010; Vega & Comer, 2005; Bernstein & Trimm, 2016; Keashly & Jagatic, 2003; Hoel & Cooper, 2000; Vartia, 2001). The current emphasis on surveys, electronic questionnaires, and a broad range of workers makes positivist assumptions (Salin, 2003), and fails to capture sufficient data to identify subjective meanings and individual experiences (Keashly & Jargatic, 2003; Lewis, 1998). To improve understanding, therefore, four study questions were chosen:

1. *To what extent does the experience of WPB differ between individuals? How is it similar?*
2. *How, if at all, does WPB affect (a) the victim’s professional life and (b) the victim’s personal life years after the event? Are there any surprising side effects?*
3. *What WPB experiences are considered the most damaging in long-term?*

¹ A recent survey by Statistics New Zealand, the Survey of Working Life (2018), discovered approximately 300,000 (11 per cent) of employed people in New Zealand had experienced harassment, discrimination, or bullying in the past 12 months (Ussher, 2019).

4. *What barriers, if any, do victims encounter when attempting to eliminate bullying in the workplace? How do victims overcome these barriers, if at all?*

Based on the narratives of six participants, this study finds WPB experiences are unique to individuals, have long-term impacts on victims, and identifies the barriers to eliminating bullying in the workplace. Affecting New Zealand's workforce, WPB has a direct impact on the productivity of employees and managers (Harvey et al., 2006), costing individuals, organisations, and communities. New Zealand-based research fails to establish the nature and extent of WPB despite high-profile incidents over the years (Bentley et al., 2013). Provisions and controls are needed, therefore, even where cases of bullying have not been formally identified (Salin, 2003). Without interventions, WPB has the capacity to injure the victim, create economic loss, and, over time, infiltrates the workplace, families, and the community in which the victim lives (Chappell & Di Martino, 2006).

Literature review

Definition of workplace bullying (WPB)

Often treated as part of the work culture (Giorgi, 2008; Escartin et al., 2011), WPB takes on many forms and definitions (Catley et al., 2013; Rayner & Cooper, 2006). Generally considered as an escalating process where the bully ends up in an inferior position and the other person becomes the victim of the bully's obstructive social acts (MacIntosh et al., 2011; Keashly, 1998), WPB is commonly defined as something someone does to gain control, power, and dominance over others (Beck, 2018). Beck (2018) describes bullying behaviour as unreasonable or unjustified actions with the purpose of upsetting another person. The intent, however, is not the consideration. It is the impact on, and the perception of, the victim that is key to determining whether or not bullying has occurred (Salin, 2003; Matthieson & Einarsen, 2010). Fuelled by the perpetrator's need to control another, WPB can be overly aggressive and violent or subtle and indirect (Chambers & Frampton, 2017; Einarsen & Raknes, 1997; Einarsen 2000). Despite the physical and psychological harm and symptoms experienced by victims (stress, headaches, nausea, insomnia, inability to concentrate, post-traumatic stress disorder), organisational responses to resolving WPB are usually disappointing and often result in providing antecedents that permit bullying to thrive (Bentley, et al., 2009; Hodgins et al., 2020).

Debates around the topic of bullying

When researching WPB, researchers must consider the major difference between 'normal' conflict and bullying. According to Salin (2003), bullying is about longevity and frequency and is not necessarily about how and what has been done. Many researchers agree with this theory and label bullying as repeated, persistent, and continuous negative behaviour that occurs over a long period (Giorgi, 2012, Ciby & Raya, 2014). The key feature for these researchers is that victims must be frequently exposed to negative and unwanted social behaviours. Leading researchers believe the key criteria for differentiating WPB from workplace violence and conflict is the repeated action of negative behaviour (Rayner & Cooper, 2006; Hoel & Beale, 2006).

According to Rayner & Cooper (2006), academic studies typically view bullying as weekly recurring behaviours lasting six months or more, however, there is no consensus about this. Catley et al. (2013) defines bullying as when victims can no longer defend themselves and are repeatedly exposed to negative actions over a long period. Despite the existence of so many interpretations by researchers, what can be confirmed is that the situation or the damage caused to the victim does not change. In the end, it is the perception of the incident from the victim's point of view that matters when reporting WPB. If the victim considers their experience to be bullying, then that is what it is (Einarsen et al., 2011).

Nevertheless, the argument remains: Is bullying a single, multiple, and/or long-lasting event and, who decides? Carbo & Hughes (2010) found through in-depth interviews from victims of WPB that single incidents were just as humiliating and damaging to self-esteem and dignity. Many respondents felt one-off events should be labelled as bullying. The requirement of repetitiveness, therefore, presents a problem in the definition of WPB. Carbo & Hughes (2010) are of the opinion that the definition needs to change and that all events should be included. This study has created a new definition that takes away the repetition component, emphasises the outcomes and recognises the severity of the action. "WPB is the unwanted, unwelcome, abuse of any source of power that has the effect of or intent to intimidate, control or otherwise strip a victim of their right to esteem, growth, dignity, voice or other human rights in the workplace" (Carbo & Hughes, 2010, p. 8).

Despite Carbo & Hughes' (2010) definition of WPB, most researchers define this phenomenon as an escalating process of repeated negative actions over a prolonged period from people encountered at work. Moreover, Harvey et al. (2006) defines the problem with WPB as both the rate of occurrence as well as the severity of bullying acts in the workplace. Conceptualised as a repeated psychological or administrative form of occupational violence (Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2003; McCarthy et al., 1995), researchers believe that the longer the traumatic events are endured, the more severe are the consequent ill-health effects (Leymann & Gustafsson, 1996). Unfortunately, due to under-reporting, data on the experiences of WPB is limited for a variety of reasons, including the risk of being stigmatised as a weak trouble-maker unable to do their job or progress their careers (Mayhew et al., 2004). Today, most researchers agree it is psychological violence inflicted on the victim over a long time (Georgakopoulos et al., 2011; Blackwood & Bentley, 2013; Einarsen et al., 2011).

However, the New Zealand view of workplace bullying expressed by O'Driscoll et al. (2011), Bentley et al. (2012) and Catley et al. (2013) does not suggest any such distinction. Catley et al. (2013) define workplace bullying as "a situation where a person feels they have repeatedly experienced negative actions from one or more people persistently over a period of time, in a situation where it is difficult for the target to defend themselves against these actions" (p. 600), and O'Driscoll et al. (2011) described it as a form of anti-social behaviour and the experience of persistent negative acts. Hence, WPB from their perspectives is that any negative behaviour, such as humiliation, victimising, intimidating, or threatening a person, constitutes workplace bullying when it is directed towards an employee in a workplace setting. Although actions can be physical or non-physical, such as verbal abuse, a one-off incident does not classify as bullying (Catley et al., 2013), however, it may be an assault and a breach

of the Crimes Act. Consequently, this view suggests that, even though the bullying characteristics are person-related, bullying in the same way as classified by Zapf et al. (1996); Leymann (1996) and Einarsen et al. (2010), if it is directed towards a person in a workplace setting, it may well constitute workplace bullying in the New Zealand context.

Impact of workplace bullying

There is an extensive body of research on the widespread negative ramifications of WPB. According to Vega & Comer (2005), Mokgolo & Barnard (2019), and Hodgins et al. (2020), WPB affects the wellness and health of the individual and the organisation, leading to low job satisfaction, reduced work performance, a high staff turnover, absenteeism, and a decrease in positive interpersonal relationships, motivation, and morale (Coetzee & Van Dyk, 2018). WPB, therefore, compromises both the individual and the organisation. Studies worldwide show a clear connection between health, bullying, and society. A list of ailments, which include anxiety, aggression, depression, stress, insomnia, psychosomatic illness, mental illness and other physical health issues, recognises bullying as the catalyst (Coyne et al., 2000; Glendinning, 2001; Rayner et al., 2002; Vega & Comer, 2005). Gardener & Johnson's (2001) study reflects on the broad economic and social implications of WPB. Responsible for creating stress-related illnesses, shattering careers, and costing society billions of dollars in unemployment, healthcare, and court involvement, WPB has severe and long-lasting consequences (Vega & Comer, 2005).

Many studies focus on the negative impact of WPB as well as the serious health consequences for those who have been bullied (Giorgi, 2012). According to Vega and Comer (2005), WPB rattles self-confidence, destroys self-image, and teaches a person they are powerless and must work harder and longer to earn the respect they deserve. A research study undertaken by Rayner et al., (2002), and Ciby & Raya (2014) found bullying created negative emotions, such as anger and frustration, that quickly turned to long-term emotional damage including humiliation, emotional torture, mood swings, an unwillingness to work, depression, and suicidal ideation. WPB adversely affects physical health and psychological wellbeing; victims suffered from an inability to concentrate and sleep as well as experiencing headaches and altered eating habits that carried into their personal home life and affected their family's peace and happiness (Ciby & Raya, 2014). The undeniable fact is that long-term WPB can leave victims with deep physical and psychological problems, high stress levels, ill health (especially gastro-intestinal disease), severe tiredness, and even leads to suicide if left to endure (Beck, 2018). For all these reasons, WPB requires further study. A lack of empirical evidence from the long-term effects on victims and society shows the need for further investigation. This is one of the prime motivations for this study project (Rodriguez-Muñoz et al., 2009; Kivimaki et al., 2000; Hauge et al., 2011).

As this study takes a qualitative approach and focuses on exploring the long-term consequences of workplace bullying on the victims' lives, it is important to review previous qualitative studies, theories, and themes. Previous studies include Ilongo's (2016) and Branch et al.'s (2007) qualitative approach to researching WPB. Aware of the need to develop data that accurately describes individual experiences of workplace bullying, these studies utilise in-depth interviews to uncover the psychological violence and themes experienced by victims of workplace bullying. Recording the victims'

original and authentic experience through their 'natural language' helps the researchers to increase the expression of the victims' 'world' and provides an in-depth understanding of individual experiences. In conclusion, Ilongo's (2016) study revealed four main types of WPB experiences: person-related; management-style related; interpersonal; and job resources related. Branch's et al. (2007) study revealed how organisational factors (environment, change and power) contributed to ongoing bullying. Both studies were important in raising awareness and increasing understanding in under-explored areas.

Likewise, another qualitative study by Simons & Mawn (2010) found four major themes relating to various types of bullying behaviours as well as the perceived causes of bullying and the impact of bullying behaviours on others. These themes/concepts included structural bullying (unfair actions and unsafe staffing situations), thoughts of leaving the job and career on a daily basis due to ongoing bullying, feeling left out and alienated, and supervisors 'eating their young' (i.e. watching new staff fail with a morbid sense of satisfaction). The identification of these themes helps to expand our understanding of bullying; however, Simons & Mawn (2010) acknowledges that little has been done to document relationships in-depth. This research, therefore, emphasises the need for additional knowledge and research to truly understand the factors that precipitate 'noxious behaviour', and how best to treat, intervene, and eliminate bullying from the workplace.

Even though the identification of workplace bullying themes has brought attention and action into the perceived world of workplace bullying, there continues to be a problem. According to Bryant et al.'s (2009) qualitative study, the rise of bullying policies and interventions from governments, mental health foundations and unions should have brought security and support into the workplace. Bryant et al.'s (2009) in-depth study of 14 individual experiences, however, revealed that victims of workplace bullying were unaware of the availability of this support. This study highlights the long-term psychological consequences on victims and the need for organisations to prevent the long-term development of cultures that tolerate abuse and harassment in the workplace. There is no point in having interventions if the culture is wrong in the first place. The problem for researchers, therefore, is the bullying culture and not necessarily the lack of policies and interventions.

Theoretical constructs provide practitioners with multiple solutions and have the ability to aid understanding of bullying practices on a deeper level. While aggressive behaviour and rogue employees may exist in the workplace, it is unlikely to flourish without support. For this reason, managers need to have a deeper understanding of what is occurring in the workplace. Brotheridge (2013) identified the need for intervention skills to screen out candidates with bullying tendencies and to provide employees with resources to cope with bullying. According to Brotheridge (2013), organisations that enable positive structures and processes by teaching and developing anti-bullying rules, programmes, and policies have the capacity to discourage bullying, leading to a happier workforce. This theory is helpful but not always practical. Qualitative research has revealed that poor bullying management can lead to a range of long-term health problems and a constructivist approach is needed to fully understand individual experiences of bullying (Brotheridge, 2013).

Rarely physical, WPB can lead to severe harm and violence resulting in death of the

mind, body, and spirit (Namie & Namie, 2000). Once seen as harmless incivility and other well-known forms of torment, WPB is, in fact, violent and disturbing (Namie & Namie, 2000; Vickers, 2013). Vickers (2013) claims that one reason this damaging situation continues is that employees and employers do not fully understand WPB and the harm it can do. Vickers' (2013) study suggests that deviant behaviours continue due to a lack of clarity, understanding, trust, experience, and a lack of confidence in how best to respond, if at all.

Furthermore, Giorgi's (2012) and Cooper-Thomas et al.'s (2013) research studies display growing evidence that prevention is better than cure, and organisations should take an active approach to issues of bullying (Cooper-Thomas et al., 2013). It is wise, therefore, for organisations to correctly diagnose a bullying problem from the outset. By studying the negative acts and their influence on workplace stress as well as the organisation's climate, culture, and job design, the focus is taken off the individual's perceptions and the problem becomes an organisational one focused on the culture. While negative acts are not necessarily the result of the workplace culture or climate, it is important that employees do not perceive negative acts as part of the culture (Giorgi, 2012).

Recent literature

In New Zealand, WPB remains a relatively new phenomenon, and resolving incidents of WPB can be difficult. According to Beck (2018), the Employment Relations Act 2000 does not specifically cover bullying, therefore, making it hard to define if legal action is taken. However, Millis (2020) states that the Health and Safety at Work Act (HSWA) 2015 does help organisations to address bullying, and that it is more of a health and safety issue than an employment relations issue. The definition of health in the Act includes physical and mental health and, of particular interest, is the culture in which bullying has been allowed to grow, and the link between a victim's health and the culture of the organisation. Giorgi's (2012) study helped researchers understand how bullying causes the culture and was not considered a consequence of the organisational climate. Affecting a victim's health both directly and indirectly, the organisational climate has the power to change the direction of the relationship between bullying and health. This means that if employees perceive negative acts as part of the organisational culture as normal, then they develop skills to cope with such negative acts/behaviour. Bullying is then perceived as part of the job (Giorgi, 2008). This scenario creates a tolerance of being bullied because victims do not recognise the intentionality of the bullies. This finding helps researchers understand why some people react and suffer mental/physical health problems while others disengage and see the climate as positive (Hoel et al., 2004).

Catley et al. (2013) suggest that New Zealand is not immune from this prevalent problem of WPB. Although New Zealand employment-related laws do not have specific provisions on workplace bullying, section 36 of the HSWA requires a 'person conducting a business or undertakings' (PCBU) to ensure the workplace is safe so far as reasonably practicable, including employees' mental health. Hence, PCBUs have a primary duty of care to identify any such risks and eliminate them so far as is reasonably practicable. Notwithstanding that people respond to stress diversely, PCBUs must ensure that the risk to them does not stem up at its source (Catley et al., 2017). Therefore, all New Zealand organisations should encourage awareness and have procedures to

report any such behaviour; not only by the victim but also by any colleagues who notice it (Catley et al., 2017). The organisations should create awareness on where the jokes end and bullying begins, especially in the culturally diverse workplaces where perspectives of bullying may be different (Sidle, 2010), for instance, one part of the world may find certain behaviour as fun in the working environment whereas, in another part, such behaviour may be held as offensive. In such cases, HSWA imposes a primary duty of care to intervene and take reasonably practicable measures to deter repeated occurrence with due seriousness (Catley et al., 2013).

As pointed out earlier, the problem for researchers is the bullying culture, not necessarily the lack of policies and interventions that often seems to be a prime focus in studies. People may consider bullying a normal behaviour, they may choose to intervene, and they may or may not be aware of the effect of their actions (Ferris, 2004). For this reason, meaningful learning and improved knowledge of the harmful consequences for the victim's professional and personal life is important. If researchers and victims can teach people through in-depth narratives how aggression affects others, they are in a better position to encourage businesses, organisations, employees, employers, and managers to seek a better choice of action.

Methodology

Due to the sensitive nature of bullying research, only a few studies have explored the experiences of bullying victims in caring for their health before, during and after bullying (MacIntosh et al., 2011). It is for this reason a qualitative approach was chosen for this research to seek and explore the experiences, opinions, meanings, relationships, and behaviour of self-selected victims (Dawson, 2009).

Associated with interpretive philosophy (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), qualitative research "is interpretive because researchers need to make sense of the subjective and socially constructed meanings expressed about the phenomenon being studied" (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 168). Often referred to as being naturalistic because of the natural setting to establish trust and in-depth understanding, qualitative data provides insight into process and the dynamics of the bully-victim relationship (Smith, 1997).

In summary, a qualitative approach and a narrative inquiry fits appropriately to this study. In order to gain a deeper understanding of WPB, the data were collected and analysed inductively, "from particulars to general themes" (Creswell, 2014, p. 4). It was acknowledged, however, during the research design that, as an emergent theory, qualitative research cannot be too tightly imposed (Creswell, 2014). As suggested by Creswell (2014), the key idea here was "to learn about the problem or issue from participants and to address the research to obtain that information" (p. 186).

Sample population

Aiming to uncover unique experiences and not to generalise over a whole population, a small number of participants were chosen from a variety of industries (see, Table 1). Due to the nature of the study, a smaller number of participants were interviewed rather than collecting large scale survey data. All victims were interested in sharing their

bullying experiences but they were also risky to interview without appropriate participant screening to ascertain if the research interview might trigger an emotional reaction. By avoiding large-scale surveys and questionnaires, a researcher could focus on gathering rich narratives from carefully selected interview participants (Dawson, 2009).

To ensure the collection of reliable data, the researcher chose purposive sampling “to describe and explain the key themes” (Saunders et al., 2016). Even though small samples can have completely different outcomes, Patton (2002) “argues that this is in fact a strength” (as cited in Saunders et al., 2016, p. 301) as emerging patterns can discover important values, key themes and uniqueness. However, to ensure maximum value, variation and similarities, the sampling in this research was both heterogeneous and homogeneous; and the participants belonged to a particular subgroup. This subgroup comprised those who must have evidence of WPB in the workforce. Their individual characteristics, however, were different (e.g. gender, industry, age) (Saunders et al., 2016).

Despite the positives, there are limitations to this selection strategy. This includes bias in the sense that the respondents are identifying other respondents known to them (i.e. Snowball sampling). This may result in a homogeneous sample (Saunders et al., 2016). For the purposes of this research, however, there were no similarities between volunteers as they came from a variety of sources, cultures, ages, industries, and economic backgrounds.

As the purpose of the research was to gain new insights and findings by better understanding of WPB from the victims’ world, appropriate study and interview questions were needed to clarify the problem (Saunders et al., 2016). To ensure the study’s questions were valid and reliable, two participants were used in pilot studies. These initial studies were recorded both electronically and with hand-written notes. They refined and tested 12 interview questions before one-on-one interviews were held with the remaining six participants.

Table 1: Demographics Profile

Participant No. (PN)	PN1	PN2	PN3	PN4	PN5	PN6	Pilot Study No. 1	Pilot Study No. 2
Age	29	60	60	28	31	62	57	28
Industry	Media	Call Centre	Social Services	Retail	Corporate	Education	Hospitality	Health
Interview type	Skype	Face to Face	Face to Face	Face to Face	Skype	Face to Face	Face to Face	Skype
Gender	M	F	F	F	F	F	M	F

Data collection process and analysis

The data collection process involved in-depth interviews with victims of WPB. Developed into a collaborative narrative with the researcher, the researcher ensured the retelling of true experiences by calming jittery nerves, carefully structuring interview questions and encouraging conversation around certain themes to ensure the highest

quality of data were retrieved. Data were collected, analysed, and coded into common patterns and themes and, after analysis, findings were summarised and divided into parts and subsections relating to each question (Creswell, 2014; Saunders et al., 2016). Presented as a holistic picture through which the reader could experience the subject's world, the final project was a construction of the victims' experiences and meanings. This allowed readers the ability to experience the challenges and impact on victims during and after the event.

To overcome researcher bias, the researcher acknowledged that reflexivity was an important component, and that the researcher's biases, values, and background may have shaped the direction of this study (Creswell, 2014). To ensure the highest quality of data and the truest experiences from participants, the researcher established rapport and confidentiality early and remained alert, respectful, on topic, and well-prepared for each interview. This relaxed the participant and opened the way for sharing the narrative experience.

Maintaining detailed records on data collection and analysis strategies, the researcher followed a strong interview process and recorded the truest experiences of participants (Creswell, 2014). This narrative analysis approach preserved the data's narrative form, avoided fragmenting the original data and explained findings in legible tables and quotes.

Findings and Discussions

Describing first-hand experiences in detail, the narratives illustrated how damaging and difficult WPB can be for victims and highlighted a need for change and new thinking. A disturbing trend in this literature was the widely held perception that organisations do not care about their employees and encourage bullying behaviour as a management tool to eliminate those no longer needed (Hershcovis & Barling, 2010; Parzefall & Salin, 2010). This position is widely shared by researchers (Hershcovis & Barling, 2010; Parzefall & Salin, 2010), and is one of the most damaging long-term experiences for victims of WPB.

Being a narrative inquiry, the findings are generally descriptive. The four initial study questions and findings are below:

1. *To what extent does the experience of WPB differ between individuals? How is it similar?*

In this study, a range of experiences were discovered, however, no two experiences or the response to the bully were completely alike. Common experiences shared by participants included colleagues failing to support the victims in most cases. In exceptional cases, for example, Participant No. 1 stood up to the bully, Participant No. 6 felt too scared to confront the bully, and Participant No. 5 felt her youth and inexperience was the reason for the bullying (e.g. *They killed my youthful spirit and energy*). Participants No. 2, No. 3, No. 4, and No. 6 felt their maturity and work experience made them victims and that the organisation used bullying tactics (e.g. isolation, threats) to make them leave. Why some workers challenge bullies and others

do not was beyond the scope of this study, however, Participant No. 5 felt the 90-day trial period* was to blame. In her narrative, work colleagues saw her getting bullied but remained silent for a number of reasons including not wanting to lose their jobs, cause a scene, and/or jeopardise a promotion (e.g. *“It wasn’t their problem and they didn’t want to step on anyone’s toes”*).

Another aspect raised from this question was how power remained a common denominator in bullying. All participants in this study were bullied in organisations which had tight hierarchies and control. Power became a ‘chief perk’ (Marano, 1995) and enhanced the bully’s reputation and position in the organisation (e.g. *“my bully was promoted...and suffered no consequences at all”*). This key finding suggests that removing the bully’s power through demotion, job transfer, or termination may be the only way to break the cycle of abuse (Harris, 1995). Initially, Participants No. 2, No. 4, and No. 5 did not recognise the bully’s need for control and power. Blaming themselves for the bullying behaviour, they tolerated and accepted it as part of the work culture until it broke them (e.g. *“I always thought it was my fault”, “I thought bullying was normal”, “I didn’t think it was a huge deal...until I started to cry over little things”*).

One common realisation from all the participants was that there is an urgent need to stop the bullying (e.g. *“I asked others why the team manager did not like me”, “I sent a letter about the bullying”, “I went directly to the owner about the bullying”*). Feeling threatened, belittled, and/or not listened to, all of the participants agreed that WPB was never okay. Jointly, they did not agree with WorkSafe New Zealand’s (2017) definition of bullying as a “repeated and unreasonable behaviour”. They all believed that WPB could happen once or multiple times, and bullies should be challenged and victims believed (e.g. *“I had a duty of care to stand up to the bully”, “we must stand up and call it what it is”, “listen to others’ stories and believe them”*).

As previously discussed, many researchers agree that prevention is better than an intervention, and organisational initiatives (constructive leadership, mediation, union involvement) are important in eliminating bullying from the workplace. According to Nel (2019), responding to others’ emotions, building collaboration, and managing conflict effectively demonstrates emotional intelligence and wards off bullying. Glendinning (2001) agrees and describes the CEO as responsible for influencing management through the application of exemplary skills in interpersonal relationships.

2. How, if at all, does WPB affect (a) the victim’s professional life and (b) the victim’s personal life years after the event? Are there any surprising side effects?

Participants No. 1, No. 4, and No. 5 were younger victims and felt that WPB did not destroy their professional relationships. It did, however, damage their confidence in the short-term. Participants No. 2, No. 3, and No. 6 were over 50 years old and found that WPB destroyed their careers as well as their professional and personal relationships. Expressing high energy, confidence, and strong work ethics before bullying, they were left feeling deflated, lacking in confidence/trust, and questioning their ability to return

* The 90-day trial period is a government initiative that gives employers with less than 19 staff the right to dismiss a worker without any reason within 90 days from the start of their employment.

to the workforce. As older victims of WPB, they experienced ageism and felt less likely to find future employment due to mental health issues from bullying episodes. Participants No. 2, No. 3, and No. 4 suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and this affected their careers in the long-term, resulting in failed job interviews and a lack of confidence.

The impact on personal relationships was less damaging than on professional life depending on varying set up of personal relationships. Personal relationships were used as a sounding board and a source of comfort during and after the bullying for Participants No. 1, No. 3, and No. 6; however, Participants No. 2, No. 4, and No. 5 only told close friends/partners. Participant No. 5 felt unsupported by her partner at the time of the bullying and “*did not confide in anyone else*” and had been much more adversely impacted by the bullying.

This question also looked for any surprising side effects of WPB. As a consequence of being bullied, all participants developed a heightened awareness of bullying environments. In particular, Participant No. 5 learned to appreciate work environments which had clear anti-bullying procedures, Participant No. 2 became an advocate for others in WPB cases, and Participant No. 4 felt a deep sense of sadness/regret in pursuing a personal grievance.

3. What WPB experiences are considered the most damaging in long-term?

This question explored experiences and found commonalities, and drilled down on the most damaging. For example, Participant No. 1 noted that workers need to stand up to bullying and to call it out the first time it occurs. However, victims usually do not report the bully incident on the first occurrence fearing that they will be victimised because they stood up to the bully. Such continuous occurrence of unreported bullying causing long-term damage to the victims, such as loss of confidence, depression, low self-esteem, a loss of faith in the workplace, and a breaking of the spirit.

According to Jorfi et al. (2012), emotional intelligence shapes the interactions between managers and employees. If co-workers (witnesses) support the victim and confront the bully, the abuse can escalate and create negative, long-term consequences (e.g. mental health problems, withdrawal from society, personal grievance proceedings, etc.). The reality is that many managers do not consider the protection of an employee’s self-esteem as important as the profit-and-loss statement (Hornstien, 1996). In this study, Participant No. 3’s spirit was broken, and she was left with long-term mental health issues (panic attacks, migraines, depression, anxiety, agoraphobia, and PTSD). She believes the “*mental torture and pressure*” she suffered acted as an “*effective weapon*” for the management team to get rid of her. As a result of long-term bullying, she “*lost faith in work environments, colleagues, and bosses*”. Participants No. 2 and No. 5 suffered similar fates and became angry and difficult employees. Both participants described feelings of anger, sorrow, distrust, and defensiveness in the work environment. For these reasons, organisations need to choose managers for their empathy and compassion, and not their tough, hard-nosed sociopathic behaviours (Babiak & Hare, 2006).

4. What barriers, if any, do victims encounter when attempting to eliminate bullying in the workplace? How do victims overcome such barriers, if at all?

All participants in this study encountered barriers when attempting to counter WPB. The barriers that all participants mentioned included spreading of rumours and lies (e.g. “*rumours cannot be stopped*”) to isolate victims from the group, inefficient complaint procedures for reporting bullying (e.g. “*I never knew who the HR manager was*”), lack of training of the managers about bullying (e.g., “*managers lacking interpersonal skills and empathy*”), and coercive bullying tactics (e.g. “*ignoring complaints as inconvenient and petty*”). As noted in the literature review, organisations that fail to train their employees and managers on WPB and procedures may also lack intervention strategies and constructive leadership styles. The senior managers turned a blind eye to unethical management practices for financial results and rewards (Glendinning, 2001; Flynn, 1999). According to Glendinning (2001), one of the best tools an ethical business can install is an environment where victims are encouraged to speak up. Unfortunately, none of the participants in this study were able to speak up due to these barriers they encountered.

Based on the four main findings mentioned above, this study expands our understanding further on WPB and lists the following recommendations to consider when dealing with it. Firstly, respectful communication should be encouraged in all workplaces. This includes managing conflict in cooperative ways and supporting colleagues when they are being abused (Nel, 2019). Secondly, remove the thinking that bullying has to happen more than once to be labelled as ‘bullying’. The opinion of all participants was that bullying happens once, a few times, or continuously over a period. The participants labelled bullying as “mental abuse”. Thirdly, recruiting tough sociopaths should be avoided (Babiak & Hare, 2006). More effort is required to training senior management in empathy and emotional intelligence and to understand the short- and long-term payoffs of working in a bully-free environment (Glendinning, 2001). Senior management must monitor, control, and stand up to bullies; if they cannot control the bully’s behaviour, discipline must be sought through performance reviews and/or termination (Glendinning, 2001). Fourthly, if the situation does not change and the management of the organisation does not take action, the bully-victim should file a formal complaint to relevant employment authorities outside the organisation. Victims of WPB should be encouraged to confide in others. Practising self-care improves mental health, aids long-term recovery, and changes the situation. Open businesses allow victims to relieve stress and discuss unfairness at work with qualified professionals (Malik et al., 2019).

Limitations of the study

The limitations of this study included the small sample size (mainly due to the sensitivity of the study topic) and a lack of male participants. The researcher’s identity may have also had an effect on interviewees. The researcher’s experience with WPB, counselling, and having worked in several of the identified industries, may have made her the ‘insider’, whom the participants could trust and build rapport. This could suggest that the findings of the research might suffer from researcher bias. Also, the findings of this research may not be generalised due to the qualitative nature of the study based on a small number of study participants. According to Hesse-Biber & Leavy (2007), the ‘insider’ is someone who lives in the same sphere (like a member of the trainer’s gym), and the ‘outsider’ is the researcher who lives in another world. Other reflections and limitations included the fear of repercussions for supplying and sharing

information and opinions. Due to the multiple identities and power relations between interviewer and interviewee and the 'insider/outsider' status, the interviews would have changed course accordingly.

Conclusions

Identifying a gap in existing literature, this study focused on learned behaviours and the experience of WPB victims. Using a narrative inquiry, this study offers a fresh look at on this long-standing problem and extends our understanding of WPB from the victim's point of view. Moreover, this study not only reinforces the emergent findings but also offers new findings on the long-lasting impacts of WPB on victims.

The findings of this study suggest that normalising and trivialising bullying behaviour has a detrimental long-term effect on the victim's personal and family life as well as professional life. This is not only detrimental for victims but also costs communities and businesses, and damages victims, families, communities, businesses, society, and New Zealand's reputation on the world stage. By exploring differences, similarities, barriers, and interventions, as well as the long-term consequences of "societal forces and changes that enable, motivate and trigger bullying" (Salin, 2003, p. 1228), people are in a better position to identify, prepare, and eliminate bullying from being a part of New Zealand's work culture. The potential benefits, therefore, will be in redefining and highlighting the severity of WPB as well as acknowledging the long-term outcomes for individuals.

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