

**The National Hazard of Workplace Bullying: Implications of an
Australian Study**

Author: Dr Donna-Louise McGrath

The University of Queensland

Email: donna-louise.mcgrath@uqconnect.edu.au

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Abstract

Workplace bullying has been identified as a major occupational health and safety hazard across Australia. This paper reports on the implications of an Australian study ($N = 411$) in which male and female workers in various positions reported on their use of covert and overt bullying behaviours over the previous 6-12 month period. The self reported bullying was found to be associated with envy toward colleagues with superior workplace traits, such as comparatively 'better qualifications. The findings reveal that a range of behaviours were regularly employed by perpetrators of bullying, despite organisational obligations under state occupational health and safety legislation to provide a safe place of work. The national harmonisation of occupational health and safety (OHS) laws is expected to occur across Australia by the end of 2011. However to date, OHS legislation and obligatory workplace bullying policies have clearly done little to prevent workplace bullying. Rather, bullied workers may receive little organisational support. New national initiatives are urgently needed to address the ubiquitous workplace hazard of bullying.

This paper discusses the implications of an Australian study ($N = 411$) on the self-reported relationship between envy and workplace bullying. Workplace bullying has been defined as "repeated unreasonable behaviour directed towards an employee or group of employees, that creates a risk to health and safety" (Victorian Workcover Authority, 2003, p. 6). 'Unreasonable behaviour' is seen as that which victimises, humiliates, undermines, or threatens, while the 'risk to health and safety' is inclusive of both mental and physical health. Workplace bullying can be based on individual qualities such as personality traits or competence, whereas discriminatory harassment is behaviour directed against a person based on their gender, race, disability, age or sexual orientation (Simpson & Cohen, 2004). From a research perspective, workplace bullying is generally regarded as repeated and persistent behaviour (Einarsen, 1999, Leymann, 1996) whereas discriminatory harassment may evolve from a single incident (Thomas, 2005). Both bullying and discriminatory harassment are unwanted behaviour which can cause distress to the targeted person.

Workplace bullying is prevalent in Australia. Some research shows that around 70% of Australian workers reported being exposed to bullying (Gregor, 2004). Bullied workers can suffer a host of physiological problems such as chronic fatigue syndrome through to psychological disorders such as depression (Djurkovic, McCormack, & Casimir, 2008) and post-traumatic stress disorder (Björkqvist et al., 1994).

Workplace bullying is mostly devoid of demographic bias (Rayner & Keashly, 2005) and anyone can bully or be bullied. However workers are often bullied when they are *different* to the perpetrator or some homogeneity of their current work group. Targets (bullied workers) often possess desirable difference traits such as being strong, competent, engaged and motivated (Strandmark & Hallberg, 2007) or being better qualified than the perpetrator (O'Moore, Seigne, McGuire, & Smith, 1998). Targets thus report 'being a professional threat' to other people (Sese et al., 2002) as a reason for being bullied, suggesting that workplace bullying may be an attempt by the

perpetrator to protect their ego and self esteem. Not surprisingly, targets have commonly identified envy as a reason for being bullied (e.g. Björkqvist et al., 1994; Strandmark & Hallberg, 2007; Vartia, 1996).

Envy involves a desire for the possessions of others. In studies where targets felt envy was a reason for being bullied, there were no gender or age differences found between targets of bullying (Vartia, 1996). This is most likely because we tend to compare ourselves with those who are similar (Festinger, 1954). Comparing ourselves to *similar* others (e.g. same gender, age and status) and making an upward comparison with their desirable difference traits (e.g. their greater competence) can incite envy. Bullying of similar others is thus common: female perpetrators target other women in 71% of cases (Workplace Bullying Institute, 2007) and in the female dominated nursing sector, a nurse may become a target of bullying by being more qualified (an upward comparison) (Hutchinson, Vickers, Jackson, & Wilkes, 2006a). By comparison, in discriminatory harassment, the difference trait (e.g. age, gender) may be discriminately perceived as unwanted (a downward comparison). It is feasible that a target can experience both bullying and discriminatory harassment.

However demographic vulnerabilities can be associated with an ‘inability to escape’ bullying and a reluctance to report bullying. In one study, targets who viewed themselves as vulnerable and sensitive persons perceived that these traits were taken advantage of (Strandmark & Hallberg 2007). Older women who are bullied may not be willing to resign and risk re-entering today’s job market, while younger women may have a lack of other employment references. For women in rural and remote locations, changing jobs is not always a readily available or easy option, particularly for women who are dependent on child care. New or trainee employees may fear reporting bullying. Apprentices, trainees, contractors and casuals are at risk of being bullied (Victorian Workcover Authority, 2003), yet trade apprentices and trainee professionals may not speak out about abuses of power for fear of jeopardising their careers (Turney, 2003). First year nurses (94% females) were found to be frequently exposed to bullying, yet over half the incidents went unreported (McKenna, Naumai, Poole, & Coverdale, 2003). Such targets may thus feel powerless to report bullying.

In addition to a feeling of powerlessness and a reluctance to report bullying, subtle and covert bullying behaviours such as being ignored or being the subject of rumours may be generally difficult for targets to prove. For example, bullying in remote area health locations in Australia was reportedly largely stimulated by envy and described as mostly being the “smaller less obvious bullying behaviours...done in a way that others may not notice” (Kelly, 2003, p. 1). Indeed such bullying may be particularly subtle and covert, because people tend to conceal and deny envy (Habimana & Masse, 2000). However although envy features strongly in the international research literature on workplace bullying, to the author’s knowledge, the role of envy and its association with bullying has never been empirically tested. In addition, universally, knowledge about workplace bullying has largely been derived from target reports and less first hand data has been obtained from the actual perpetrators. In light of the literature, a study of Australian workers was conducted to measure the relationship between envy and bullying; uniquely captured from the perpetrators’ perspective.

Overview of the study: Workplace bullying and envy

The self report *Workplace Envy and Bullying Questionnaire* was administered to a random sample of Australian workers. The sample ($N = 411$) consisted of 33% males and 67% females. Both public (53%) and private (47%) sector workers were represented, with most having worked on a permanent basis (79%) for 6-10 years, with 36% having worked for 10 years or more. The frequency and duration of two types of workplace bullying were measured including: 'informal bullying' behaviours which could be employed by workers in any position, such as spreading rumours and 'formal bullying' behaviours which could only be employed by workers with superior job status (e.g. managers) such as an 'unfair allocation of unpleasant tasks'. Envy was measured in a 45 item envy scale as: 'a desire to exceed colleagues' and feelings of inferiority and anger in the domains of qualifications, competence, popularity, reputation, achievement, admiration, promotion and recognition.

Results

The results showed that workplace envy was common and that workers who scored high on envy scored high on bullying, as shown in Figure 1.

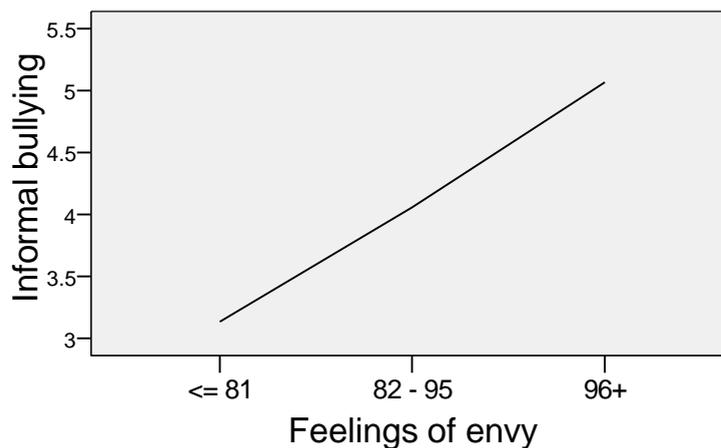


Figure 1. The relationship between total envy and informal bullying mean scores ($N = 411$).

The results of the study showed that there was a relationship between envy and both informal and formal bullying. Interestingly, the relationships were stronger for workers who reported higher levels of envious anger (McGrath, 2010).

Some of the bullying behaviours which were employed by both male and female perpetrators of bullying are shown in Tables 1 and 2.¹

¹ Results of study should not be considered indicative of bullying prevalence rates (*all* perpetrators may not have returned the survey: a response rate of 27% was achieved).

Table 1. Some informal bullying behaviours perpetrated by male ($n = 136$) and female ($n = 274$) workers ‘at least monthly’ over the previous six month period.

Informal Bullying (by workers in any position)	Males	Females
	%	%
Withheld necessary resources from others	5.2	5.8
Moved belongings of others without their permission	6.6	5.1
Spread rumours about others	6.9	7.1
Excluded others from work events or activities	8.4	5.8
Ignored colleagues in same department	18.1	20.0
Yelled at work colleagues in a hostile tone	12.6	5.1
Used disrespectful gestures such as finger pointing	17.7	7.0

Note. Total sample consisted of: Directors ($n = 62$), Managers ($n = 77$), Supervisors ($n = 48$) and Team members ($n = 221$). (3 participant missing position values)

For informal bullying, workers in organisations with over 5000 employees ($n = 13$) used ‘disrespectful gestures such as finger pointing’ (23.1%) and ‘repeated rumours’ (62%) at least once per month. When differences in length of employment were investigated, workers employed for 6-10 years ($n = 61$) scored significantly higher for ‘ignoring colleagues’ ($p = .031$) and ‘repeating rumours about others’ ($p = .011$).

Table 2. Some formal bullying behaviours perpetrated by male ($n = 28$) and female ($n = 37$) workers ‘at least 1 or 2 times per year’ over the previous 12 month period.

Formal Bullying (by workers in superior positions) *	Males	Females
	%	%
Unfairly allocated the most unpleasant tasks	7.2	2.7
Excluded relevant people from team meetings	10.7	2.7
Sent cc e-mail to point out the faults of others	17.9	21.6

Note. * Sample consisted of self identified: Directors ($n = 20$), Managers ($n = 26$), Supervisors ($n = 8$) and Team members with formal power ($n = 11$).

Implications of the findings

The perpetrators’ self-reported bullying in this study persisted over the previous 6-12 month period, demonstrating that the occupational health and safety hazard was either not formally reported, or it was not effectively deterred. In addition, the average length of employment for the sample was 6-10 years, suggesting that the bullying could have persisted over a longer period. The findings are examined in light of research on target and organisational responses to workplace bullying.

Research on target responses to bullying

The results of this study showed that males reported using more overt behaviour such as yelling, which suggests that in female dominated sectors such as nursing, covert behaviours may be more common. Many of the covert behaviours used by workers in this study (e.g. spreading rumours; Table 1) could have been conducted without the target's awareness and also would have been difficult for the targets to prove. Often the perpetrator's behaviours can be so subtle and indefinable, that targets may have difficulty describing them (Keashly, 2001). In one study, female targets who experienced daily stress as a result of behaviours such as 'being talked over at meetings' and 'having their furniture moved' did not consider the behaviours to be serious enough to challenge (Lewis, 2006). In this study, similar behaviours were reported, where workers frequently 'moved the belongings of others without their permission'. The targets may have similarly questioned whether the behaviours would be perceived by others as 'trivial' and whether they might warrant formal reporting. Indeed Djurkovic et al. (2005) found that the formal reporting of workplace behaviour only occurs in response to violent behaviours. The less personally arduous response to being bullied at work is avoidance behaviour such as ignoring the perpetrator(s) or transferring elsewhere (Djurkovic et al., 2005). Many targets respond to bullying by leaving the organisation (Keashly 2001, Rayner, 1998, Victorian Workcover Authority, 2005). However, perceived organisational support can moderate the effects of bullying on the target's intention to leave (Djurkovic, McCormack, & Casimir, 2008).

Research on organisational responses to bullying

The behaviours in this study persisted over 6-12 months. Targets may not report bullying because they rationalise that their organisation will not take any action and because they fear retaliation (Keashly, 2001). Indeed a large US survey ($N = 7,740$) found that "in 62% of cases, when made aware of bullying, employers worsen the problem or simply do nothing" (Workplace Bullying Institute, 2007, p.10). In Australia problems with the workplace bullying internal organisational grievance procedure have been reported, namely; the target is often 'moved' elsewhere (Queensland Council of Unions, 2001) while the perpetrators can be protected and promoted (Hutchinson, Vickers, Jackson, & Wilkes, 2006b). Further, managers may deny the existence of bullying in a work unit to which they are responsible, viewing any admission of bullying as discrediting their own leadership abilities (Björkqvist et al., 1994).

In addition, workers in this study who were in superior positions used their work duties to bully (formal bullying) over the previous twelve month period (Table 2). Australian workplace codes of practice often stress that bullying excludes managerial actions such as performance management processes and the provision of performance feedback to subordinates 'when performed legitimately'. Yet formal bullying by superiors can be disguised and embedded *within* legitimate workplace rules and processes, such as '*unfairly* allocating the most unpleasant tasks' (enacted by workers in this study). Targets may feel powerless to making a formal complaint about superiors. Further, in interpreting workplace bullying events, the employee with the higher formal status may be supported (Rayner, Hoel, & Cooper, 2002). In cases of mobbing (bullying by a group), personnel (human resources) may align with a group's bias and see the stigmatised target as the problem (Leymann, 1996).

Recommendations

Enacting effective workplace bullying policies

A workplace bullying policy becomes little more than an obligatory piece of paper if little is done with the policy beyond its mere provision. Indeed employers are more likely to have policies in place for managing bullying than for preventing bullying (Victorian Workcover Authority, 2005) and some stakeholders perceive that a workplace bullying policy can be nothing more than “a piece of paper” (Victorian Workcover Authority, 2005, p.10). In one study, 94% of participants argued that workplace bullying occurs because “bullies can get away with it” (Rayner, 1998, p. 582). In some cases, bullying policies may only be shown to workers during ‘induction’, at the commencement of their employment. Yet the average length of employment for workers in this study was 6-10 years; suggesting that some time had elapsed since possible ‘exposure’ to a bullying policy. Further, in this study, workers employed for 6-10 years scored higher for covert behaviours (ignoring others and repeating rumours) and those in organisations with over 5000 employees regularly bullied. The results are suggestive of some ‘bullying comfort zone’, perhaps afforded by both stability in employment and distance from monitoring in larger organisations. Employers thus need to regularly instil in employees that they do not tolerate bullying and are vigilant in monitoring the behaviour. A regular email attachment would provide an easy means to regularly remind workers of the bullying policy and expected behaviour. Further, in ineffective ethics programs, general codes are used rather than being contextualised to the company, so that there is a ‘lack of embedding’ (Webley & Werner, 2008, p. 407). Similarly, in ensuring all bullying behaviours are encompassed, behavioural policy examples (e.g. ‘isolating workers’) are broad. Additional interpretations using occupation-specific examples may assist workers to identify the related behaviours, e.g. ‘excluding relevant people from meetings and cc e-mail lists’(isolation) in teaching and ‘hiding tools’(withholding resources) in trades. Behaviours such as ‘throwing food’ in hospitality may be somewhat difficult to align with broad definitions. In addition, workplace bullying policies should be inclusive of formal bullying behaviours embedded into legitimate processes by superiors.

Encouraging target reporting

Organisations can be enablers or constrainers of bullying through their workplace practices. As a sustainable risk management strategy, workplace bullying *monitoring*, prevention, assessment and training by organisations should be *ongoing*. This should be built into OHS legislation and made clear to organisations. The regular administration of anonymous staff surveys would provide a means for organisations to monitor the prevalence of bullying in particular units and provide an informal means for targets to anonymously report bullying. Organisations should actively encourage workers to report bullying, provide clear guidelines for making formal complaints (e.g. in writing) and put protocols in place for making it safe to do so. While researchers may treat bullying as repeated and persistent behaviour, one off behaviours can have an ongoing impact on the target and should also be reported. This may put a stop to the behaviour before it escalates further. Given the personal shame associated with bullying (Lewis, 2004) peer reporting on behalf of bullied colleagues could also be encouraged by organisations. The Australian stigma pertaining to ‘dobbing’ might be replaced with a ‘support a mate’ type campaign.

National workplace bullying initiatives

Internationally, legislation to deal with workplace bullying is largely fragmented and piecemeal. In Australia workplace bullying is variously dealt with via legislation such as anti discrimination (which does not apply to all cases – workers often envy and bully a *similar* other) and each state's occupational health and safety (OHS) laws; which basically outline duties for employers to provide a 'safe' place of work. However differences between states in relation to the detail of OHS legislation led to the need to develop model OHS legislation, as a way of achieving national harmonisation by 2011 (consisting of a model principal OHS Act, regulations and codes of practice). In the Australian Government *National Review into Model Occupational Health and Safety Laws Second Report* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009), it is recommended (R.121, p. 147) that a worker may cease work if it becomes unsafe. In relation to this, some concern has been expressed regarding the inclusion of all hazards such as bullying (pp. 144-145). This is pertinent because bullying (as a 'psycho-social' hazard) can consist of repeated and sometimes subtle behaviours (e.g. being ignored) which *gradually escalate*, rather than having one major 'unsafe' point. Indeed many bullying behaviours may, on their own, be accepted as normal interactive work behaviours, yet when used frequently over a period of time, they tend to take on a different meaning (Leymann, 1996). By comparison, other OHS hazards may be identified by a direct, immediately known multi-sensory threat (e.g. smell of chemicals, appearance of equipment) to known long term physical harm (e.g. asbestos), so that the conditions for stopping work are much more apparent. Treating different constructs with the same measures is thus difficult. Further, legislation and associated policies can also have an unintended policy effect: organisations may seek to protect their image (impression management) or legal liability by denying the existence of OHS hazards such as bullying and they thus can have a conflict of interest in conducting their own bullying grievance investigations. In addition, false bullying claims can be made against workers and severe punishments for doing so should be made known to employees and built into workplace bullying policies. A further issue is that the need to identify the bullying complainant in Australian occupational health and safety inspections can place the worker at risk of further victimisation (Johnstone, McNamara & Quinlan, 2008). Indeed the Australian Government held a national inquiry into whistleblowing protections within the Australian Government Public Sector (2009) in which reprisals can similarly occur.

National support services are needed to help bullied workers reduce their vulnerability and maintain their self esteem. The grievance process may provide little distributive justice for the target. The need for targets to relive and dwell upon their bullying experiences (Lewis, 2004) demonstrates that for many, there is a sense of unfairness which remains unresolved. 'Being heard' rather than 'being questioned' was thus found to be important for female targets (Lewis & Orford, 2005) and although they seek some comfort in the disclosure of their bullying experiences to colleagues, targets reported experiencing 'shame' about disclosing bullying to authorities (Lewis, 2004). Women who do not formally report bullying out of pride may still need somewhere accessible to seek support, particularly since female targets reported experiencing diminished social support and the 'withdrawal of relationships' at work (Lewis, & Orford 2005). Bullying can also have a 'ripple effect', impacting on the target's relationships outside the workplace (Lewis & Orford, 2005). National Working Women's Centres and industry services such as telephone helplines (e.g.

Nurse Crisis Line, Kelly, 2003) are thus vital in extending support networks to all women, including those in remote locations, private sector workers in smaller organisations and women in male dominated industries. Of course for other targets, professional psychological advice may be necessary.

Effective nationally accredited workplace bullying training is needed. In general, workplace bullying training programs tend to be generic awareness ('what is bullying?') type courses. The holistic contextualisation of flexible training programs which are purposely tailored to the industry or specific workplace (McGrath, 2007) and perhaps delivered 'on the job' could be beneficial. Further, tertiary and higher education institutions should incorporate 'ethical bullying grievance management' into human resource and business management course curriculum.

It is imperative that Australian government initiatives are introduced if a more unified sustainable approach to controlling workplace bullying is to be adopted. The National Centre Against Bullying focuses on childhood bullying, of which the Australian Government has commissioned two important research studies. The NSW Government has also conducted an important inquiry into bullying of children and young people (2009), which was necessarily broadened to include apprentices and trainees. However there are differences between school and workplace bullying and a national body is needed to specifically tackle the problem of workplace bullying. The Australian Government's *2020 Summit* (2008) did not incorporate workplace issues such as bullying, although ironically, ways of fostering and supporting human capital (talent management) in the Australian economy was a theme. Yet as this study found, talented workers are at risk of being bullied. Recent research suggests that envy intensifies during an economic crisis as employees become resentful of more successful colleagues (Menon & Thompson, 2010): perhaps exacerbated in Australia where egalitarian norms associated with the tall poppy syndrome already characterise the social landscape. The association between envy and bullying as outlined in this perpetrator-reported Australian study is thus a cause for concern. Further, workplace bullying has been identified as a major occupational health and safety issue in many Australian states (e.g. Labor Council of NSW, 2004) and is a risk to the economy, as it culminates in a plethora of effects on workers, the organisation, and society; having an estimated [2003] cost to Australian industry of between six to 13 billion dollars per annum (Poilpot-Rocaboy, 2006). An Australian Government national inquiry into workplace bullying, as a specific construct, is therefore essential to finding national solutions to the largely unaddressed yet ubiquitous national problem. Every Australian worker has a right to a fair, safe, healthy and respectful place of work.

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