Poor bullying prevention and employee health: some implications

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Abstract
Purpose – This paper aims to investigate employee reports of workplace bullying in which participants argue that poor management of bullying led to a range of health problems, both physical and mental.

Design/methodology/approach – A constructivist approach is adopted to develop an understanding of individual experiences of bullying. Qualitative research interviews are used as the method of data collection and focus is on individual participants as the unit of analysis. Data are analyzed using thematic analysis in which both deductive and inductive themes are developed.

Findings – Findings suggest that lack of or poor workplace bullying policies impacts are used negatively on employee health. Specifically, analysis of employee reports suggest that the inability to successfully report bullying, or have bullying complaints taken seriously leads to ongoing implications for the individual.

Research implications – Future research needs to focus further on examining reasons why some organizations do not develop and implement anti-bullying policies, as well as further investigate the characteristics of bullying cultures so that effective interventions can be developed and health issues associated with bullying minimized.

Originality/value – This paper contributes to workplace health practice by providing insight into the risks that poor bullying management can have on the health of employees. It is proposed that such consequences could lead to an increase in litigations in the event that employees demonstrate that organizations have not provided a duty of care. Finally, the paper argues that organizations that do not attempt to prevent bullying may inadvertently contribute to the long-term development of organizational cultures that tolerate harassment and abuse.

Keywords Bullying, Personal health, Qualitative research

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Bullying in the workplace has received increasing attention over recent decades and continues to be an area of concern for both researchers and organizational practitioners. From a practical perspective, concern about workplace bullying has led to the development of bullying policies within individual organizations as well as interventions by unions, mental health organizations, government and other non-government based bodies. Such focus on bullying prevention and management could create an assumption that organizations now have more resources and are better equipped to handle bullying issues as they arise. Our paper, however, suggests that this may not be the case. Findings from a constructivist, qualitative study of 14
individuals' experiences of bullying – as sufferers – suggest that some organizations have yet to adequately engage with strategies aimed at prevention and management of bullying. Of the participants, ten reported that known bullying policies did not exist or had not been communicated to staff at any time during their tenure within the organization. A further three participants suggested that policies had been developed but were not taken seriously or acted on in the event that bullying was reported. A final participant reported that bullying policies did not exist in his organization until he filed a bullying complaint, which the organization used as the basis for developing procedures in the event of future bullying cases.

The aim of this paper is to explore several common findings from participant reports of their bullying experiences. The first of these suggests that bullying complaints in all of the cases were not taken seriously, which we argue may be a consequence of poor preparation on the part of the organization, or a lack of understanding regarding the consequences of bullying for both the individual and the organization. The second finding highlights the serious consequences that bullying can have on individual physical and mental health, which participants attribute to poor bullying prevention. Finally, we highlight some of the strategies that the participants themselves believe would be most effective at promoting justice and wellbeing and preventing further bullying from occurring. Our paper contributes to workplace health practice in several ways. First, we provide insight into the risks that poor bullying management and prevention can have on the immediate health of individual employees. Second, we suggest that if bullying remains unmanaged there are potential long-term psychological consequences that could be detrimental to employee health both within and beyond the workplace in which bullying occurred. From an organizational perspective we believe that such consequences have the potential to lead to an increasing level of litigations in the event that employees can demonstrate that organizations have not provided a duty of care or exercised appropriate levels of workplace safety. Finally, we argue that organizations that do not attempt to prevent bullying may inadvertently contribute to the long-term development of organizational cultures that tolerate harassment and abuse. This not only leads to further potentially negative outcomes for short and long-term health of workers' health, but also to poor organizational health.

2. An overview of bullying in organizations
Recent decades have witnessed a proliferation of workplace bullying research. Deploying a diversity of methodologies across a range of disciplines, researchers have explored definitional issues, types of bullying behaviour, causal factors, incidence studies, and inordinate workplace power differentials (Branch et al., 2007; Zapf and Gross, 2001). Some have investigated motivational intentions, the value structure of organizations and the generalized impact of bullying on targets and organizations (Tehrani, 2004; Liefooghe and Davey, 2001; Zapf, 1999). Other schools of thought propose models to account for workplace violence, organizational antecedents, bullying prevention, and psychological harassment (Salin, 2003; Poilpot-Rocaboy, 2006). There is also a growing body of literature investigating bullying in the form of abusive supervision and other forms of uncivil treatment perpetuated by managers toward subordinates (Burton and Hoobler, 2006; Duffy and Ferrier, 2003; Tepper, 2007; Tepper et al., 2006).
The multi-causal nature of bullying underscores the difficulty in the search for definitional consensus (Agervold, 2007; Djurkovic et al., 2005) and it is known that different targets experience different types of bullying (Notelars et al., 2005). Nonetheless, a common denominator of most definitions is a perceived power imbalance. A practical definition proposed by Einarsen et al. (2003, p. 15) explains that:

Bullying [...] means harassing, offending, socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone’s work tasks [...] it has to occur repeatedly and regularly [...] over a period of time [...] is an escalating process [...] the person confronted ends up in an inferior position and becomes the target of systematic negative social acts.

While bullying can take many forms, it appears to have four specific features: intensity, repetition, duration and power disparity (Hoel and Beale, 2006; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007).

The literature clearly suggests that bullying hampers productivity by creating dysfunctional workplace behaviour; and is costly in financial and human terms. From an organizational perspective, bullying is correlated with low job satisfaction, high employee turnover and intention to leave, increased absenteeism, and decreased levels of organizational commitment (Farrell and Geist-Martin, 2005; Salin, 2003; Vartia, 2001). Hoel et al. (2003) make the point that managing bullying grievances can place pressure on resources, such as financial, human and time, within organizations, particularly if litigation, or separation of the bullying victim and perpetrator results. In Australia, the Queensland Government Workplace Bullying Taskforce (2002) add that costs of worker’s compensation and investigation of bullying complaints can increase significantly expenditure associated with the management of bullying events.

From an individual perspective, bullying has been explored in terms of its effects on the health, safety and welfare of the individual who experiences it, including the impact on interpersonal relationships and family functioning (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007; Tracey et al., 2006; Beed, 2001). Health outcomes such as depression (O’Moore et al., 1998; Kivimaki et al., 2000), suicidal thoughts (Einarsen and Mikkelsen, 2003), stress-related health problems (Einarsen and Skogstad, 1996), and even an increase in the likelihood of cardiovascular disease (Kivimaki et al., 2003) have also been documented as consequences of bullying. Einarsen and Mikkelsen (2003) provide a comprehensive overview of the effects bullying can have on an individual ranging from the physical and mental through to manifestations that directly impact on the organization such as burnout, low job satisfaction and absenteeism. They also draw attention to the traumatic impact bullying can have on some individuals highlighting possible links between long-term bullying and post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (See also Bjorkqvist et al. 1994).

From a practice-based perspective, the increased focus on bullying as an occupational health and safety (OH&S) issue has led organizations to develop a range of interventions to ensure to not only manage bullying once it occurs, but to also prevent it from occurring in the first place. In Australia, legislative compliance by organizations is necessary to ensure that workplace harassment protection exists for employees. For example, in the state of Victoria – where our research is located – the Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004 (the Act) states that an employer “must, so far as is reasonable, practicable, provide and maintain for employees of the employer a working environment that is safe and without risks to health” (Stewart, 2008, p. 263). Further, employees are required, under section 25 of the Act to “take reasonable care of their own health and safety, and the health and safety of others” (Work Safe Victoria,
2003). Consistent with the Robens model of self-regulation (Creighton and Stewart, 2003) Work Safe, the inspectorate body in Victoria, have issued a guidance note on how bullying should be managed at the workplace. The note provides clear guidance as to how bullying should be dealt with in workplaces over a six-stage process. The stages range from initial creation of awareness of bullying – and its inappropriateness – within the workplace through training and other forms of communication; through to development and implementation of bullying policy, including training staff to be proficient at working with policy; before finally focusing on the identification and control of risk factors at work that may lead to bullying and how to report bullying should it occur (Work Safe Victoria, 2003). Although Work Safe Victoria strongly recommend that organizations create a no-bullying policy, a 2004 Work Safe survey revealed that only 60 per cent of Victorian organizations had a policy in place and only 66 per cent of workplaces had formal procedures to report bullying (Work Safe Victoria, 2006). We argue that a recommendation that organizations create bullying policies differs substantially from a requirement to comply legislatively and, as such, organizations may not feel the need to develop bullying policies in the event that they are not legally required. We further argue that this could lead to a perception that bullying is not treated seriously in some organizations.

A study of victims and non-victims’ perceptions of their organisation’s attitude to bullying showed that victims were more likely than non-victims to perceive that their organisation tolerates bullying (Leck and Galperin, 2006). Leck and Galperin’s study also suggests that victims of bullying believe that bullying can be reduced significantly through three steps: notifying new employees that bullying is not tolerated; provide human resource departments with appropriate tools and resources to address bullying; and to provide a clear message that bullying is not tolerated in the organization. Another study by MacIntosh (2006) found that employers with policies that addressed and enforced anti-bullying were most successful in reducing bullying at the workplace. This suggests that clear policies and procedures are crucial for managing and preventing policies. While this argument may not be surprising, we suggest that further exploration into why bullying policies are not developed in organizations is needed. Based on literature discussed so far, it could be that policies in Australian organizations are merely recommended rather than enforced. We suggest that this, combined with knowledge levels of business owners about bullying could lead organizations to inadvertently overlook the importance of preventing it. For example, organizations may not develop bullying policy as consequence of poor understanding of the need to, or poor understanding of potential consequences for victims and the organization.

Throughout the remainder of this paper we focus specifically on the reports of 14 participants who experienced bullying within their organizations. The participants highlighted that bullying policies either did not exist within their organizations or were given “lip service” and not followed in the event that bullying was reported. All of the participants reported significant health consequences – both physical and mental – of bullying and attributed this to poor management and prevention of bullying.

3. Methods
Our research was primarily concerned with developing an understanding of individual participants’ experiences of workplace bullying and was therefore developed using a
constructivist approach (Guba and Lincoln, 2005; Croyt, 1998). Consistent with a constructivist approach, qualitative methods were adopted to enable transaction between the researchers and the participants (Lincoln and Guba, 2005). The qualitative approach enabled us to understand and collect data on the "significance of [the bullying] experience, or the sequence of events" (Denzin, 1989, p. 83) that occurred, while ensuring that the different interpretations and frameworks for understanding developed by individual participants were recognised. Similar to Einarsen and Mikkelsen (2003), we argue that the bulk of literature concerning the impacts on bullying on individual health has been developed quantitatively, often within the context of medicine or health psychology disciplines, and that further qualitative studies that explore individual interpretation of bullying are necessary. Qualitative studies provide an opportunity to:

 [...] Show that the victims themselves attribute their health problems to their experiences of being bullied [...] for some victims may feel that even a questionnaire designed to measure psychological and psychosomatic problems following traumatic events does not sufficiently capture the degree to which exposure to bullying has damaged their mental and physical health (Einarsen and Mikkelsen, 2003, p. 130)

The 14 participants were recruited for the study via an Australian-based legal centre with which members of the public are able to file complaints and seek information from regarding employment-related issues. The centre was specifically interested in the experiences of individuals employed in the manufacturing, hospitality and retail industries. Therefore, participants were recruited by the centre’s staff from these industries. A total of 14 (nine female and five male) participants took part in the study. For ethical and confidentiality purposes the researchers were unable to take part in the recruitment process, including follow-up of potential participants. The final sample was made up of 11 participants from the manufacturing industry, two from retail and two from hospitality industry. As the participants were not evenly distributed across the three industries the researchers focused the data collection and analysis on the individual participants as the units of analysis (Yin, 2003), which is appropriate in using a constructivist approach. However, we recognize that a limitation of the sample is that the resulting data could be biased by the high level of participants being derived from the manufacturing industry and, as such, acknowledge that the findings may not be generalisable across other industries.

To develop an understanding of each participant’s experience of bullying, data were collected using qualitative research interviews within a semi-structured format (Fontana and Frey, 2005; King, 2004). This form of interviewing enabled the researchers to focus on a series of themes within the interview process while simultaneously obtaining rich descriptions of individual’s bullying experiences and interpretations within the context of their unique backgrounds and values. Interview questions were developed around several broad themes including participants’ background information; individual consequences of bullying; perceived causes of the bullying; information about the organization; bullying policies in the organization; and social support within and external to the workplace. The interviews lasted approximately one hour each and were audio taped and transcribed for data analysis. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis in which the researchers searched for and categorized both deductive and inductive themes (Marshall and Rossman, 2006) from across the different experiences of bullying. For example, the
researchers specifically asked participants to comment on the impact on bullying on them as individuals, as well as the existence of workplace bullying policies. However, patterns across the broader deductive themes, such as the various effects of bullying on individual health, and the ways in which participants thought bullying could be better managed or prevented were determined through inductive analysis, which was driven by open coding (Miles and Huberman, 1994). In analyzing the data two primary themes emerged that are of significance to this paper. The first theme highlighted that all participants experienced both physical and mental consequences of bullying to various extents. In analyzing this theme further, we interpreted causal links to another theme in which participants attributed the extent of these consequences to poor management of bullying within their organizations. We explore and discuss these themes in more detail within the following sections of the paper.

4. Bullying policies and grievance handling procedures
A common theme across the participants’ reported was a perception that bullying was not taken seriously either as a result of managers not thinking reports of bullying were significant, or as a result of managers not possessing the skills or knowledge to manage bullying effectively. Furthermore, participants reported varying levels of workplace bullying policies existing within their organizations, which were attributed to the way in which bullying was (or was not) handled. In most cases bullying was reported as being instigated by supervisory staff, therefore, most participants believed that their complaints would not taken seriously by more senior management. In such cases, participants also felt that they were unable to file a grievance based on the seniority of the bully or their relationship with the owner/most senior manage in the organization.

Of the 14 participants, ten suggested that there were either not any policies in existence, or any known policies, as none had been communicated to them at any time throughout their employment. In comparison, three participants reported that bullying policies did exist but were not followed when a bullying event occurred. A further four participants stated that bullying policies were developed and implemented into the organization only after he made a bullying complaint, which was then formalised and communicated to staff across the workplace. Participants who did have existing bullying policies argued that they were stated on entry into the organization. For example, one participant suggested that a policy that stated “no bullying […] and everyone should respect each other” (1)[1] was presented on commencement of her employment. Similarly, a second participant reported that the organization “used to photocopy things [about bullying] and give them out to all of us” (7), while a third participant described being told on entry into the organization “about bullying not being tolerated” (8). A common feature of the participants’ reports, however, was that bullying policies were perceived as being based on compliance rather than a proactive interest in the prevention of bullying. The three participants found that in the event that a bullying grievance was filed, policy was either “paid lip service” (1), managers turned a blind eye (7) or, managers instigated the bullying (8).

In comparison, those who stated that known bullying policies did not exist reported a multitude of other policies relating to the governance of workplace behaviour including policies pertaining to general occupational health and safety, swearing, fighting on the job, theft, and sexual harassment.
When we all started, and I thought this was unusual because I'd never worked anywhere where they'd done this before [...] we were all given a manila folder with the most extensive information on sexual harassment in the workplace I've ever seen in my entire life [...] But when the bullying occurred there was no information, no help, no nothing (4).

The only thing they ever said to me was, if I ever started a fight, I would get sacked and that was the only thing they ever said to me (2).

When asked what happened in the event that participants wanted to file a grievance with their employers, participants provided a variety of responses. One, for example, reported being told "if you don't like the bullying, well leave" (14), while another participant suggested that management "just turned their heads" (7). Other participants felt that there were no available avenues for complaining about bullying with one suggesting that "if you did say something I got back to the person involved straight away" (1) and another asking, "who would I go to? [the bully] was my direct boss" (5). In comparison, other participants suggested that some actions were taken to try and deal with the bullying complaints. In one case an independent person was brought into the organization to "help workers to solve problems" (11). However, a common theme across participants' reports was that management developed actions that "looked as though" they were dealing with the grievance without solving the problem, or providing favourable results for the participant. For example:

They went through all this rigmarole of doing the right thing, which they had to do. So they did all that right, but I knew it was just [...] I may as well have been talking to a brick wall (6).

The steps were to see the team leader [...] then go to the senior team leader [...] then go to Human Resources, but all of them are the same [...] People know [the complaint] doesn't go anywhere. It just comes back on you [...] it's just a joke! (8)

As highlighted in this section of the paper so far, participant reports indicate that bullying policies either were not clearly communicated within their organizations, or in the event that they did exist, were not implemented effectively in the event that bullying complaints were made. Analysis of the data clearly indicated that participants experienced increasing frustration at the ongoing nature of bullying as well as the lack of management of it. Participants commonly reported that they felt as though they were treated as "just a worker", or as someone who was dispensable and could be easily replaced. These factors combined were clearly linked within the data to physical and mental consequences.

5. Effects of bullying on individual health
When asked about the effects of bullying, participants reported both physical and mental health consequences. Some participants reported suffering from "niggling" illnesses such as gastric disorders, frequent nausea or stomach upsets, while others reported experiencing constant colds and influenza type symptoms. Commonly reported health concerns included anxiety, stress and depression, which varied in intensity across the participants and manifested in different behaviours and symptoms. In analysing the data we found that several of the participants reported health consequences of bullying and then suggested that their symptoms were possibly not reflective or as bad as the experiences of others. For example, throughout her interview one participant questioned whether or not her bullying experience was
"worthy" of being considered as part of our research. The participant had experienced bullying in the form of unrealistic sales target, unrealistic deadlines and excessive pressure from her manager, but felt that she had not suffered to the same extent as others. Throughout her report the participant discussed suffering from high levels of anxiety and stress while in the workplace as well as poor appetite, weight loss and persistent insomnia which she directly attributed to the actions of her manager and having to work within the organizational environment. When asked if she suffered such symptoms on a regular basis the participant reported that they were directly linked to her experience of being bullied.

Similar manifestations of bullying were evident within other participants' reports:

My appetite wasn't as good because I knew I had to go to work and I didn't want to go. I'd cry [...] I'd be scared to go [to work] at the same time, so it was a mixture of being scared and being frustrated at the same time (10).

I couldn't eat well, I couldn't sleep well [...] I always had much worry, sometimes my mind would be a complete blank suddenly, and this always happened. Once I think of my case, I cannot help crying because I felt there were so many grievances of mine (11).

Reactions to bullying such as crying, fear and/or not wanting to go to work were common across the participants' reports. Although none of the participants were comfortable working within the environment in which bullying took place, some participants seemed better able to cope with having to go to work than others. Some participants reported that the effects of bullying were too much for them to cope with and turned to consumption of alcohol, drugs such as anti-depressants and tranquillizers, or smoking to help them manage their experiences.

I was just so angry all the time that I'd get home and I'd [...] be going over everything, everything that had happened that day, constantly going over it. Couldn't focus on any one thing, and I would be screaming out loud in my [apartment], you know, just going over everything and screaming and that, and. I mean I don't drink, but I found I was coming home, drinking, coming home of a night time after work and drinking. (3)

I never used to drink or smoke and I started drinking and smoking and when I was working there and I'm still drinking but I'd given up smoking [...] I drink to go to sleep. I can't go to sleep and I have so much hate for the company, even now [...] I was feeling like heavy in the chest and now I'm starting to get grey hair. When I left. I was 32! (8)

While such behaviours have been associated with stress (Prone, 1999; Ng and Jeffery, 2003; Akinori et al., 2004), several participants in our study reported of never or not regularly partaking in activities such as consuming drugs or alcohol prior to experiencing bullying and linked it directly to their experiences. Others reported of experiencing depression to the point of feeling suicidal, which also was described as never being experienced until the bullying took place.

I used to say to [my doctor], "I feel like when I am driving to work, I feel like having a head on with another car so I don't have to go to work, or like hitting a pole" (2).

[I got to the point where I'd had enough] when I wanted to commit suicide. Yeah and when the bosses didn't believe me and I took sick leave for as a long as I could after that and I just couldn't come back. I came back for a little while. I just wanted to kill him. It was either kill him or kill myself. (6)
Participant reports of the effects of bullying reported in this section clearly indicate varying levels of severity. However, we argue that as bullying is a subjective and contextual experience, any negative effects have the potential to be traumatic for those who experience it. As Lazarus (1993, p. 3) argues, stressful circumstances do “not produce dependable effects”. Therefore, different responses to and effects of bullying suggests that individuals appraise bullying according to perceived levels of threat or harm, or according to past experiences. The strategies individuals use to cope with bullying are also of significance. Some participants reported being able to cope with the effects of bullying through the use of strong social support mechanisms such as talking to family and friends. We interpreted this strategy as a form of “pseudo-voice” (Keeley and Graham, 1991) in which individuals felt that they did not have an avenue in which they could voice their concerns and frustration to someone within the organization and therefore directed it to others outside of the organization. Perrewe and Zellars (1999) suggest that individuals will develop strategies to cope with stressful circumstances such as bullying in an attempt to create a more positive environment. For example, those who seek to use more active strategies may believe that they can alter their circumstances, while those who use more passive strategies may not and therefore seek to distance themselves from bullying through escapism (see for example, Lazarus, 1993; Perrewe and Zellars, 1999).

We argue that the need to engage in escapist or pseudo-voice based coping strategies is indicative of the broader problem in which effective bullying policies and grievance handling procedures were largely not available to participants within their organizations. It is also possible that such behaviours are indicative of bullying not being managed in a way that was deemed appropriate by participants in the event that attempts to prevent and manage it were made by the organizations. As part of the interview process, we asked participants to comment on what they thought were the best ways for bullying to be prevented and/or managed as we were interested to explore what they believed would be effective strategies for handling bullying. Several key themes emerged from the different reports of bullying that focussed on communication, culture change from the top of the organization, and penalizing those who failed to take bullying seriously.

Nearly all of the participants commented at some point within their interviews that a major problem associated with the way in which bullying was handled by the organization was the lack of communication. Specifically, participants did not feel that they were listened to and reported that listening to and taking bullying complaints seriously could have alleviated a lot of the problems associated with being bullied. As several suggested:

You really do need to listen to both sides of the story [...] what's happened and what the circumstances were and then come up with some sort of way of dealing with it (1).

I just wanted to sit down and have a talk. If [management] think that I have done something wrong or there are some misunderstandings, we can explain or clarify some facts or just say sorry to each other and then forget the past. But even this point, the most basic condition, couldn't be accepted by the company (11).

It's a hard call, it really is. But there needs to be someone that [...] people can speak to [...] professionally [who will] listen to all sides of the story [...] to try and work it out (3).
A further common report across participants' accounts was the perception that bullying was considered as acceptable behaviour by those at the top of the organization. Hence, a simultaneous perception that bullying problems would not improve without culture change from the top was held. One participant felt that senior management should become more involved in "walking the talk" (13) to better deal with bullying. Another participant suggested that bullying problems could be alleviated in the event that senior managers were rotated "every two [...] or three years" (8) and if employees had input into who the senior management team was. The same participant also stated:

If the top management knows about [bullying] everything should be forced on the senior level right to the top because whatever happens at the bottom is happening from the top. So if you nip it from the top, then [it] will flow through [...] I don't think the team leaders will do anything [to prevent bullying] unless the top management's given them the ok to do it (8).

Other participants suggested that bullying should be managed in a harsher manner in which those who failed to deal with it were formally penalized. Discussion of monetary fines was evident in which participants reported of the need to "hit [management] in the back pocket" (6) in order for them to be accountable for not developing, following and equitably applying policy across the organization. Regardless of the nature of participants' suggestions, the various reports of bullying were interpreted as being underpinned by issues of equity, justice and fairness further suggesting that the negative implications of bullying may have been avoided in the event that participants' perceived equitable and just treatment by their managers and organizations.

6. Discussion and conclusion

In this study we found that most organizations did not introduce policies aimed at managing or preventing bullying. Further, those that did introduce policies did not appear to effectively communicate or implement these policies, and appeared to function in an organizational culture that – directly or indirectly – did not reinforce zero tolerance of bullying behaviour. Ferrie et al. (2006) argue that unfair treatment in the workplace, particularly by supervisors, increases the risk of poor mental health. Based on participants’ reports, we argue that regardless of legislative requirements, such as the Victorian Occupational Health and Safety Act (2004), or strong recommendations by Australian bodies such as Work Safe, the climate in which many organizations operate may pre-empt workplace bullying, thus rendering any existing policies ineffective.

Our primary focus in this paper was to explore the effects of non-existent or ineffective bullying policies on participants’ health. Participant reports clearly highlight what they believe to be causal links between ineffective management of bullying and poor health outcomes. Their reports also provided insight into a number of mental and physical problems that we believe could impact on their long term health and effectiveness as employees. This paper therefore further demonstrates (see for example, Einarsen and Mikkelson, 2003; Einarsen and Skogstad, 1996; Kivimaki et al., 2000) that aside from the obvious organizational costs of bullying, such as lower commitment and higher levels of absenteeism and turnover, the human costs are significant. Although the health consequences of bullying varied significantly –
ranging from crying and an unwillingness to attend work, through to more extreme responses such as suicidal and homicidal tendencies — we argue that individual experiences of bullying are subjective and that all reports that indicate of health consequences should be taken seriously. We further argue that the consequences of bullying as documented in this paper possibly indicate that although a number of government and non-government bodies provide an abundance of information and assistance on bullying, some organizations still seem to be unable to manage or prevent it.

In addition to our concern for the long-term health of those who have experienced bullying, we are equally concerned with the need to combat bullying through the establishment of organizational cultures that do not directly or indirectly sanction bullying behaviours. We argue that organizations need to develop a proactive stance and establish codes of civil workplace conduct alongside anti-bullying policies and procedures. This action would send a clear message to stakeholders that uncivil inter-personal workplace behaviour is unacceptable and may go some way to prevent bullying occurring in the first instance. Training is then necessary of all staff, especially line supervisors, regarding the implications of policy. We believe that supervisors and managers need to be made more clearly aware of the financial and human consequences of bullying for their organizations and be empowered to deal with bullying situations. Finally, clear and fair processes need to be established to deal with bullying once it has occurred (Namie and Namie, 2002), which was clearly an issue raised by participants as needing to be addressed.

Besides the suggestions made above, we argue that for an organization to successfully promote a zero tolerance attitude towards bullying, changes need to be made at the most senior levels of organizations. For example, a culture of respect for diversity should be communicated from the top of the organization and clearly reinforced by management through equitable rewards or, if necessary, coercions. Other strategies such as the promotion of inclusive work practices and providing effective employee assistance programs could also be of benefit in developing and maintaining a positive organizational culture (Luzio-Lockett, 1995; MacIntosh, 2006). Regardless of these suggestions, we found communication to be one of the primary issues for participants in the process of having bullying concerns addressed. As is evident in the reports featured in this paper, communication was limited, leaving participants with both a perceived lack of voice in the bullying process, and a belief that there was not anyone within the organization they could talk to about their experiences. On this basis, we suggest that communication and trust is paramount and that strategy as simple as an "open door" policy may provide the foundation for better management of bullying.

In concluding, we argue that this paper provides some insight into the importance of developing clear and effective bullying policies, and demonstrates the negative effects that not doing so can have on staff. We also recognize a number of limitations. First, we have focused our study only on the reports of those who experienced bullying as a victim. We realize that individual employees may not represent the experiences of others within the same organization and that other staff may hold very different perceptions of bullying within the organization. A second limitation is that we do not provide insight into managers' perceptions of bullying and therefore can only speculate
as to whether or not attempts to manage bullying were made and the consequences and contexts surrounding these. The nature of our sample provides an additional limitation with the majority of participants being from the manufacturing industry. Although we focused on individual participants as the unit of analysis, we acknowledge that characteristics of the manufacturing industry may indirectly bias the data. A final limitation is grounded within the constructivist nature of the research. As constructivism is aimed at developing an understanding of individual experiences, the findings across the group of participants featured in this paper may not be comparable or generalizable across other groups. Despite these limitations, this paper makes a contribution to the literature by qualitatively examining not only reports of what organizations to do prevent bullying, but the effects of this on employee health. We suggest that future research needs to focus further on examining reasons why some organizations do not develop and implement anti-bullying policies, as well as further investigate the characteristics of bullying cultures so that effective interventions can be developed.

Note
1. Individual participants are identified using numbering from 1-14.

References


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