# The 'bully' within

**Caitlin Buon** and **Tony Buon** call for a stop to the profiling of 'the bully'

Why is it that when harassment at work is talked about the tendency is to talk about unwanted or unacceptable behaviour, but when talking about bullying the focus is more about 'the bully'?

Even when discussing racist or sexist behaviour very little attention is generally given to the nature of the perpetrator and yet there is a tendency to focus more directly on the make-up or motives of the person who may use bullying behaviour and to label them in a pejorative way as 'bullies'.

## Profiling bullies

This can be seen in many of the catchphrases that are used by organisations in their internal awareness campaigns and on various websites including 'bully in sight', 'don't bear the bully', 'fight the bully', 'spot the bully', 'get the bully', and 'declare war on the bully'.

A number of popular publications and websites also refer to the personality traits of bullies or types of bullies. However, how often do we see this type of language being used about harassment, such as 'spot the harasser' or 'fight the harasser'?

It would be reasonable to interpret this treatment of workplace bullying as part of a process of 'profiling' people who use bullying behaviour. This article explores the issue and asks why this is happening and what impact it may be having on our organisational and individual interventions with bullying behaviour.

The profile that is emerging is that 'the bully' is always aware of what they are doing, deliberately sets out to harm their 'victims', targets a particular individual or type of person and has some kind of underlying personality flaw, insecurity or disorder. However, what evidence is there to support this profile and is it helpful to promote such a profile?

## Understanding bullying

This immediately raises the question of what is being talked about when we refer to workplace bullying and whether it is understood to be inclusive of a spectrum of subtle, covert and unintended behaviours along with more overt and extreme behaviours or whether it is viewed primarily or only as a severe, deliberate or extreme form of behaviour.

In their recent research on dignity at work, Charlotte Rayner and Karen McIvor[1] examined this issue of 'definition'. This research involved interviews with practitioners, experts and focus groups across Great Britain. In their discussions with experts and focus groups, they found that: '...there was an agreement that physical abuse or threats were always unacceptable and strong agreement that people should not be intimidated and work in fear. There was no agreement on any other behaviour that could be defined absolutely as bullying.'

In this same study it was agreed in general terms that harassment based on specific reason (for example gender, race, disability) was understood in the workplace and that the study participants understood the basics of 'discrimination and issue-based harassment'. However, it was also reported that the participants 'cannot grasp something similar in connection to bullying' and it has been suggested that the reason for this is 'perhaps within the difficulties connected to definition'.

The understanding of issue-based harassment is now underpinned by the legislative framework for protection from harassment introduced in the UK over the past few years. This framework provides a legal definition of harassment that refers to the two elements of 'unwanted conduct' which has the 'purpose or effect' and of 'violating that other's dignity or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for that other'[2].

An objective test of the perceived effect of the unwanted conduct is provided so that 'if and only if, having regard to all the circumstances, including, and in particular, the perception of that other, it should reasonably be considered as having that effect'.

All the relevant regulations that use this definition in some form refer to conduct that is based upon a particular issue or social category such as gender, conduct of a sexual nature, sexual orientation, religious belief, disability, race or ethnic or national origin, or age. However there is still no specific legislative definition of bullying or 'generic harassment'; that is, bullying or harassment that is not linked to or based upon any particular issue or social category of the recipient of the unwanted behaviour.

However, it can be seen from the way in which such cases are dealt with at common law that by and large the same principles have been applied

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to issue-based harassment and generic harassment. It can also be seen that bullying cases have been treated as generic harassment. In this sense, if a person has been harassed or bullied because they have ginger hair, are overweight or underweight, are of a different class or background, or are perceived as different or 'not fitting in' or alternately for no apparent reason, then that behaviour will be considered using the same principles as are applied when considering behaviour that is covered by a protected category.

But do organisations and individuals as a rule regard bullying in this way or does it hold some special status or currency even though they may not be able to point to any specific behaviour that is categorically identifiable as bullying but which could not also be regarded as harassment?

Rayner and McIvor[1] put the question of re-naming bullying completely to experts and in several focus groups. They report that some experts 'felt very strongly that it needed to be named as it was, with the potential ensuing shame-related issues connected to the playground'; other experts felt that 'playground associations produced complex emotional reactions in targets such as shame and unwillingness to admit to being bullied and should be avoided, if possible'. The focus groups failed to find agreement, some stating that 'they didn't care what it was called so long as the behaviour was dealt with' and others stated that 'bullying was too active a word to describe the many forms of passive-aggressive bullying'.

It is suggested here that it is this emotional baggage and associations with the playground and criminal bullies that come with the word 'bullying' that is driving the current primary focus on bullying as an extreme form of behaviour and the tendency to profile 'bullies' rather than focusing on the prevention of and response to bullying behaviour.

## Predatory and unintended bullying

If we accept the view that bullying is generally and primarily regarded as a more severe or extreme form of harassing behaviour then what implications does this have for how we intervene with both the person using this behaviour and the recipient?

Before addressing this question it is important to explore what we know about the prevalence of bullying as a predatory form of behaviour compared with the more generalised, indirect and unintended type of behaviour, both of which have a profound impact on the recipient.

In 2000, Helge Hoel and Cary Cooper conducted the most comprehensive study of workplace bullying to date, involving more than 5,000 employees from over 70 organisations in the private, public and voluntary sectors across Great Britain.

In *Workplace bullying: what we know, who is to blame, and what can we do?*[3] the authors explain the findings from this study. They report that indirect acts (such as information manipulation) are much more commonly found than direct acts (such as being shouted at).

It is our understanding that there is no evidence in this major study, nor in any other subsequent study that the more overt or extreme forms of behaviour that tend to be associated with the term 'bully' are being reported by those experiencing bullying at work as the most frequently occurring negative behaviour. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that this evidence is not consistent with a view that workplace bullying is for the most part a more extreme form of negative behaviour than harassment.

This brings us to the question of what we know about the intention or motivation behind such negative behaviours. Is there evidence that people using indirect and/or direct bullying behaviours are, for the most part, motivated by a desire to deliberately cause harm to the recipient of the behaviour or conduct a deliberate predatory campaign of negative behaviour?

This is where the available data trails off as there are very few reliable or significant direct studies of people who have used or are using bullying behaviours, owing to the obvious challenges for researchers in accessing this population; the data that is available is drawn for the most part from the recipients of bullying behaviour. Rayner, Hoel and Cooper[3] have examined this material and a number of related sources of data in the areas of management behaviour, management and power, conflict, psychoanalytic approaches, school bullying, aggression studies and negative behaviour at work. They make some sobering observations about what findings can be reliably extrapolated or applied to workplace bullying from these areas of research.

They argue that 'we will not get very far by looking for single types of behaviour that fit nicely into academic categories' and that the evidence from related areas of research also 'shows the difficulty we will have in determining what constitutes a typical "bully" and allocating behaviour into neat categories'. They also argue that 'employers should wait for studies which use much larger samples of managers before trying to employ stress and mental health as singular measures to back up the labelling of people as bullies'; that 'we have data which shows that, with small samples of managers, the situation is too complex to draw any conclusions'; and that 'practitioners should therefore be wary of those who "profile" bullies'.

## Implications for intervention

We have reliable evidence then that the recipients of bullying are experiencing a much higher frequency of indirect negative behaviours rather than the more overt and direct types of negative behaviour typically associated with bullying. We also have near to no objective evidence about the prevalence of the predatory or deliberate intentions of those who use direct or indirect bullying behaviour. Yet the idea persists that workplace bullying is a more extreme form of harassment behaviour and the profile of 'the bully' as a belligerent and predatory individual continues to gain greater currency.

In particular, Tim Field's[4] detailed profile of 'pathological bullying' and his reference to 'workplace bullying as 'the second greatest social evil after child abuse, with which there are many parallels' has found much support and can be seen reflected and repeated in the wording of organisational definitions, policy statements and articles about bullying across the UK.

So how is this understanding of workplace bullying driving the organisational and individual responses to this type of behaviour and how does this understanding shape the type and success of interventions being offered to those who are experiencing this behaviour and those using this behaviour?

There is no doubt that there are individuals who are predatory and do wish to deliberately harm the person or persons who are on the receiving end of their negative behaviour. However our experience as practitioners in the investigation and resolution of workplace conflict involving allegations of bullying and harassment tells us that they are in the minority and that the majority of bullying that is being experienced is in fact unintended. That is, the person using the bullying behaviour is unaware of the true impact their behaviour is having on someone else and does not intend for that other person to be harmed.

This is not to suggest however that the impact on the individual is any less significant or less deserving of protection and intervention. Although clearly if a person has knowledge or a belief that the person using bullying behaviours intends to cause them harm then this would inevitably play a significant role in the way in which they experience the impact of that negative behaviour.

As discussed earlier it is equally unlawful for a person to harass another person at work whether they intend to cause harm or harm was caused unintentionally. What is important is that the person is protected from the negative behaviour irrespective of why they have behaved in that way. When it comes to disciplinary measures or a finding by an employment tribunal it is at this point that establishing intention also plays a significant part
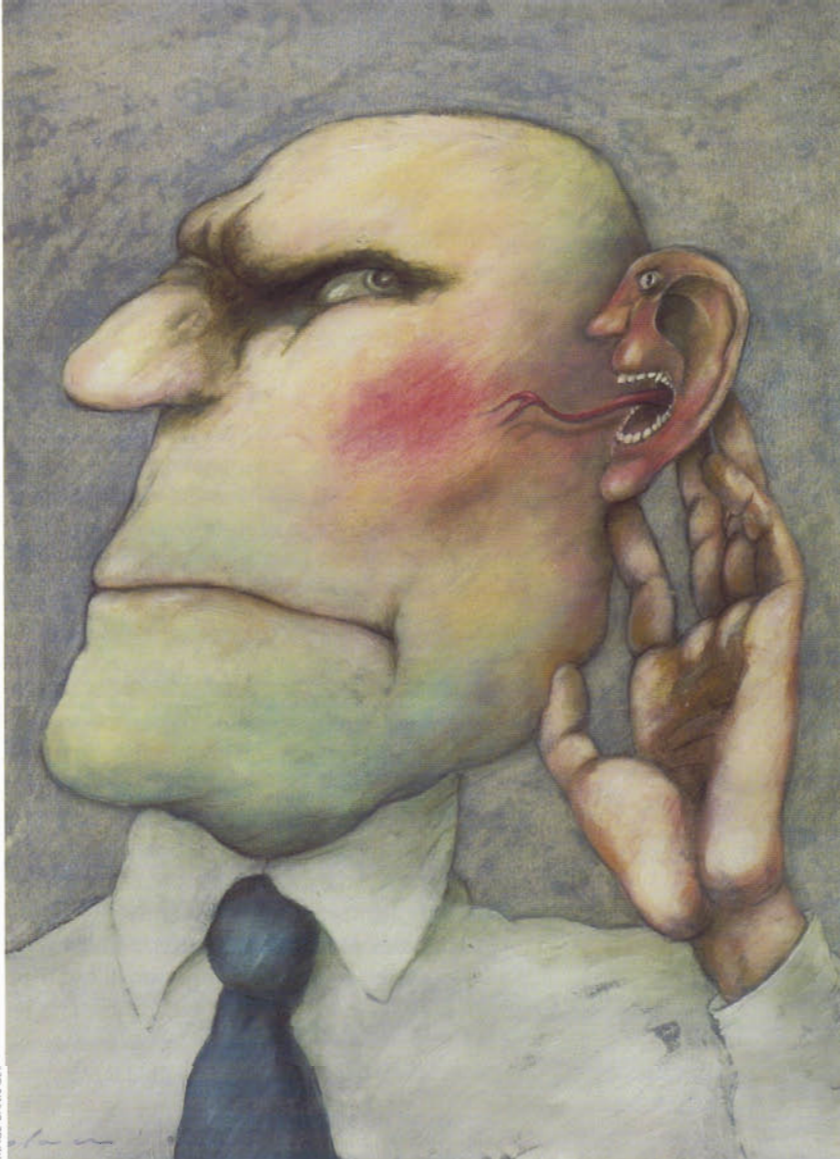


IMAGE BANK/GETTY

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in determining an appropriate sanction or level of compensation as deliberate acts of bullying are generally regarded as more severe than those that are found to be unintended.

If organisational definitions, policies and awareness campaigns are primarily focused on responding to predatory bullying behaviour, but in reality this does not represent the main type of bullying behaviour actually being experienced by employees, then we would argue that the organisation's resources and interventions will never be able to capture the true nature and proportion of the problem as their efforts are misplaced.

Perhaps even more important, however, is the effect that this perception of bullying and the profile of 'the bully' is having on the capacity of those experiencing bullying to speak up and seek assistance

and the capacity to engage more effectively with those people using bullying behaviour because both groups feel alienated by the language, meaning and emotional charge that is currently attached to the word 'bully'.

## Making sense of experience

In our experience when investigating or mediating allegations of bullying and harassment, complainants will offer a whole range of theories or beliefs about why they believe they have been subjected to certain negative behaviours and what they believe the motives or reasons are behind the alleged bully's behaviour.

In other instances complainants will offer no theories or beliefs about intentions or motives and are completely bemused and confused about what they are experiencing. Others do not want to believe 'the worst' about another person or do not want to think of themselves as victims and so do not attribute any motive as all they want is for the behaviour to stop and for things to 'return to normal'.

In most cases we find that the complainant will not have spoken with the other person about their alleged behaviour and how it is really impacting on them and so very often the other person has no awareness that their behaviour is causing a problem.

For those of us engaged in an intermediary or helping role with such complainants, whether as a first contact, mediator, investigator or as an EAP counsellor, it is clear that for many people part of the process of trying to 'make sense' of their experiences is to attribute motives or underlying meaning to the person who is subjecting them to unwanted behaviour.

However in many instances the subjective experience of the complainant is not always found to be based on fact and it is not always possible to provide the parties to such complaints with the opportunity to reality check their assumptions or beliefs and acquire a new understanding about what has happened or to receive confirmation of their beliefs. Because mediation brings together all the parties to the dispute in an attempt to find a resolution it is possible to create a space within which both parties are able to explore their perceptions and understandings with each other and so increase the chances for a shared and mutual understanding to develop about what has occurred and how to move forward.

But how can we get the parties to the table if both parties are only able to speak about bullying using language that is shame-and-blame based and carries with it the emotional baggage of the 'pathological' or predatory bully when in all likelihood this does not reflect their actual experience?

## The bully within

In conclusion, we would argue for a reframing of our understanding of workplace bullying and perhaps a good place to start is with a change in language. If we were to refer to workplace bullying as generic harassment along with other forms of non-specific harassment then this would at least enable employees to use less emotionally charged language and start a dialogue about their experiences rather than being repelled by the spectre of being labelled as a pathological predator or having to define their experiences as the victims of such a person.

We would also advocate a more inclusive definition and understanding about bullying behaviour so that organisations and individuals were able to embrace the idea that we all have the potential of using our personal power positively or negatively and that when we do use it negatively, either intentionally or unintentionally, it can result in behaviour that can be experienced as bullying or harassment. In this way organisations and individuals can be facilitated to take a more collective responsibility for the problem and the solution.

In this sense we would argue that the current perception and profile of the workplace bully is not facilitating our interventions with the problem. If we are going to make significant progress and achieve behaviour change over the long term then we would suggest that organisations and individuals need to embrace the notion that we must all potentially house 'the bully' within ourselves and our organisations. It exists in our workplace cultures, our belief systems, our interactions with each other and our emotional competencies and cannot be transformed if we continue to externalise and demonise the problem by profiling 'the bully' rather than talking about behaviour and our interpersonal interactions.

Our experience also highlights the need for further research in this area with a focus on the experiences and outcomes of individuals who participate in workplace mediations that involve allegations of bullying and harassment. ∎

### References

1 Rayner C, McIvor K. Report to the dignity at work project steering committee, research findings. Portsmouth University Business School; 2006.

2 Employment Equality Regulations: Religion or Belief 2003; Sexual Orientation 2003; Sex Discrimination 2005; Race Relations Act 1976 (Amendment) Regulations 2003; Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (Amendment) Regulations 2003.

3 Rayner C, Hoel H, Cooper C. Workplace bullying: what we know, who is to blame, and what can we do? London: Taylor and Francis; 2002.

4 Field T. Bully in sight: how to predict, resist, challenge and combat workplace bullying. Oxfordshire: Success Unlimited; 1996.