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# Bullying, Illtreatment and Redress Utopia

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Workplace bullying and incivility proving quite difficult to eradicate despite decades of research.

Significant deleterious impact for individual and organisational health and well being.

Kingsley (2009) has argued that in some organisations it is reaching epidemic proportions nursing, teaching and increasingly higher education contexts emerge as particularly susceptible.

While single definitions prove elusive in the research literature (but not in policy) we advocate that a comprehensive understanding of the range of damaging behaviours is warranted.



# Definitions...?

We draw on Lutgen Sandvig et al's (2007) triad categorization of behaviours under the range of harmful behaviours and communication.  
**Superordinate:** counterproductive workplace behaviours; organizational injustice, organizational misbehavior; aggression, anti social behaviours, violence.

**Intermediate:** emotional abuse, undermining, harassment, mistreatment

**Subordinate:** incivility, petty tyranny, social ostracism, verbal abuse, victimization, verbal aggression.

The list is not exhaustive and categories overlap.



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# Power...

We argue that abuse of power is at the core of the problem and advocate an understanding of power as multi faceted, structural, relational, elusive, ambiguous, complex, sometimes subtle, often not....

No cut and dried text book way to bully. Bullying is as flexible and creative as the bullies who perpretrate.



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Understanding *why* people bully is also more complex than traditional understandings of the 'weaker victim' or the 'personality clash' or the 'robust manager'...

Organizational culture is an important variable...

Our research with post primary teachers evidences that the micropolitics of the school as a workplace can be a significant enabler of workplace bullying.

Micropolitics = The use of formal and informal power by individuals and groups to achieve their goals within organizations.



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# Teaching

In a post primary school this is manifest in the unspoken hierarchies that translate into the organizational culture “the way we do things around here (Senior 1987).

Who is valued when they speak in meetings, who is ignored, who has access to resources, etc...who is supported...

*“I sent the pupil to the principal I just didn’t know what else to do and he sent him back. The student brashly swaggered back into class and said Mr X said deal with me yourself. I knew in that moment my life would become a living hell and it did.”*

Subject hierarchies e.g. physics teachers more intelligent than PE or Art teachers?



- In higher education administration petty tyrannies abound...
- Control of time, seating and work benches, making leave requests difficult, isolation, ostracization, retaliation for promotions; retaliation for seeking change or seeing to leave, or to be promoted....
- Seeking redress unsatisfactory...



## Why responses matter..

- How does the target, bystander, organisation respond to incidents of bullying?
- Why are responses so important?



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*‘The incident itself was one thing – I found it difficult but it didn’t upend me ....how others reacted floored me. I could not believe they thought this was acceptable. I began to question everything .. my whole view of the world changed’*

*‘People would offer me support privately but I began to resent this almost as much as those who stayed away’ (Alma, teacher)*



# Responses to bullying in nursing

- Our research suggests responses from targets and bystanders are low involvement, low immediacy responses
- McDonald et al. (2016) suggest that low involvement reactions, while important sources of social support, may occur at the expense of more public high involvement and high-risk responses. Such responses may risk perpetuating the problem by providing coping mechanisms that may enable those involved to tolerate/cope with bullying behaviour without actually addressing it



# Bystander responses..

- Most likely to engage in informal action (informally discuss with colleagues (42%) or supervisor, 22%)
- 13 % of individuals who observed bullying confronted the perpetrator directly.
- 10 % formally reported what they had observed to a supervisor and 9 percent took no action at all.
- 2 % stated that they would formally report the incident to their union representative.



# Why is this the case?

The main reasons cited for feeling uncomfortable taking action were:

- An expectation of negative career consequences, a perception that power perpetrator is too powerful and an expectation of feeling isolated
- A lack of organisational support and ineffective system arose frequently under the 'other' category.



Our qualitative data highlighted a perceived lack of organisational support, as reflected in the following quotes:

- *‘Staff feel powerless. If one intervenes they get the same treatment’*
- *‘We can't report it, because we will be the next target’*
- *‘The management hate complaints and those who complain are the next target’*
- *‘Support systems are not strong’*
- *‘I feel complicit...but cannot face the fallout’*



# Feeling safe to act?

- Not feeling safe to act was a common theme
- Supervisory and organisational lack of safety
- ‘the bully is my line manager and friends with the assistant director of nursing. I rest my case’
- ‘Would not report bullying again. I was witness to bullying and was interviewed by management. It was a terrible experience’
- ‘The bully is in a very senior managerial role, when complaints in the past were brought up she made life impossible for people so some of them let. She hasn’t changed her ways’
- Job security (type of contract) ; ‘No I am on a fixed term contract’



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These findings highlight the importance of supervisory/organisational safety, power dynamics and a belief in the system if high involvement actions are to be taken. Research has highlighted the need for support from those in a position of power and who are less fearful of reprisal is essential (McDonald et al 2012).

- Yet is this happening?
- Job safety emerged as an important factor in the qualitative literature
- Those in vulnerable or tenuous position may be reluctant to step in



# What might be done?

- Clarity around definition of bullying and incivility
- What is – and what is not - bullying
- Increasing awareness of bystander role
- Training interventions for victims and bystanders can also be useful for encouraging positive actions from bystanders and can help encourage high immediacy/high involvement actions
- Training in managing difficult behaviour for both managers and all staff



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- For anti-bullying measures to be effective there must be **sufficient organisational will** and our findings underline the critical importance of organisational and supervisory support for observers' decision to confront a perpetrator or take formal action.
- There is therefore a need for those in positions of power, who have the authority to recreate social norms to take a more proactive approach to bullying and to provide support to others who do so.



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# Questions to consider..

Group work



- Any examples of incidents of incivility/bullying where the response of those involved led to a positive resolution?
- Why?



- An example of a bullying/incivility case where the response led to an ineffective (or no) resolution?
- What were the factors that determined this outcome in your opinion?



- Jenna is a CNM 3 in a busy ward. Louise has just come to her to ‘informally inform’ her of a series of incidents that have taken place over the last few weeks including her exclusion at coffee, conversations stopping on her arrival and sniggering.
- She names 2 individuals, one of whom Jenna knows and is aware she can be ‘difficult’. Jenna is extremely busy and this is not something she has time for or feels comfortable dealing with. She tries to reassure Louise by suggesting it may not be anything personal and to ‘lay low’ for a while. Louise leaves the office feeling dejected. Jenna hopes this will just go away and she can get on with her real job.

What should Jenna do?



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- Caroline is a teacher in a busy urban school. She has a partner and a son and is openly gay in the school. She has recently been informed of homophobic postings on a public face book page by a colleague. While she is not personally aggrieved, she is worried for the reputation of the school and approaches the principal to deal with the matter. The principal refers to the individual in question as likely to be litigious and suggests the face book page is not a school matter. She suggests she ignore it and continue on with her work. The posts increase in volume and in vitriol and this and the lack of response from colleagues and the school has led to the incidence personally problematic for Caroline.
- What should the principal have done?



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- Improving Organizational Relationships and Behaviours  
(an inter-institutional research group focused on the continuum of bullying and of well being...)
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