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**Author(s):** Rainivaara, Sini

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# Workplace Bullying Relationships

Sini Rainivaara

At their best, co-worker relationships offer us professional challenges, stimulating interchange of ideas, support and shelter against pressure (Sias & Cahill, 1998). At their worst, problematic co-worker relationships cause constant stress or hurt, reduce our job satisfaction, as well as add to the loss of energy and commitment (Omdahl & Fritz, 2006). In particular, experiencing workplace bullying is highly stressful for an individual (Hoel, Faragher, & Cooper, 2004). Undoubtedly, being accused of bullying is also unsettling, although this topic has not been covered either in public or academic debate.

This chapter examines some characteristics and maintenance behaviors of workplace relationships in which at least one of the participants perceives oneself to be bullied or/and has been accused of bullying by a co-worker. This relationship is called a *bullying relationship*. Further, the ambiguity, which may arise in perceptions of who is bullying whom, is also briefly discussed.

Various labels have been applied to behaviors where a co-worker, superior, or subordinate is perceived to systematically injure a member of the same working community in various ways. Bullying (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996), emotional abuse (Keashly & Harvey, 2005), mobbing (Leymann, 1996) and workplace aggression (Baron & Neuman, 1996) are just a few examples of the English terms used to label the phenomenon. In this chapter I will use the single term *bullying*, as I refer to non-physical forms of aggression which are perceived as hurtful.

Generally, workplace bullying is described as repeated negative acts by one or more members of the same working community in a process which lasts a relatively long period of time (Leymann, 1996; Vartia-Väänänen, 2003). Further, Einarsen and Skogstad (1996) add to the definition the target's difficulties in defending oneself against these actions. Persistence, repetition, and a perceived power imbalance have remained as key elements in the definitions provided by several researchers (Einarsen, 2000; Leymann; Rayner, Hoel, & Cooper, 2002).

But, ambiguous views have been put forward as to whether the definition of bullying should include the perceived bully's intention to hurt despite his awareness of the negative consequences. In many cases it is difficult to get clear evidence of intentional bullying due to the diverse testimonials given by different people involved in the process (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003).

However, be it intentional or not, the consequences of perceived bullying for individuals, such as the various psychological and physical symptoms similar to, for example, posttraumatic stress disorder are well documented (Hoel, Faragher, & Cooper, 2004; Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2004).

Research on bullying in the workplace has focused on investigating the frequency, intensity, and prevalence of bullying in workplaces of many different kinds (Hoel, Cooper, & Faragher, 2004); outlining the nature of bullying as a process (Leymann, 1996); as well as the various forms it is seen to take in practice (Einarsen, 1999). Researchers have also attempted to delineate portraits of bullies and their targets by investigating the perceived targets' views as to their personal characteristics (Coyne, Seigne, & Randall, 2000; Zapf, 1999). Further, one of the most often-asked questions in bullying research is why does it happen (e.g., Zapf).

There are a variety of behaviors that can be seen as forms of workplace bullying. In appearance they are, in principle, no different from the occasional hurtful interaction, which is hardly avoidable in any significant relationship. However, in bullying the distinguishing and eventually detrimental factor is the continuous repetition of this hurtful interaction. The perceived targets might perceive that their intellectual abilities, trustworthiness, and skills as a worker are constantly questioned in various ways. Bullying can include very direct and observable attacks. But it can also take a more subtle form. In addition, the targets often perceive that the perceived bully constricts their working resources as well as manipulates their social networks through gossip and slander. (For a more detailed description of the characteristics of bullying, see Einarsen, 1999; Leymann, 1996; Rayner et al., 2002; Vartia-Väänänen, 2003.)

Even if the scientific definitions of bullying are somewhat in line, the various manifestations of bullying, and the variety of subjective perceptions of what counts as bullying of the everyday communication in the workplace certainly makes the phenomenon challenging to handle, and hard to intervene; and makes it difficult to support those involved. Further, concentrating on just the perceived bullying behaviors means that many other characteristics of bullying remain unknown.

### **A Communicational View on Workplace Bullying**

When investigating the relationship between the perceived bully and the perceived target, the emphasis in workplace bullying research has usually been on describing the particular hurtful behaviors of the perceived bully instead of on the everyday communication of the two individuals caught in the stressful situation and the way in which this works to maintain relations between them. And, although the perceived targets' responses to bullying have been investigated in the field of communication (e.g., Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006), the

perceived bullies' and targets' behaviors have been investigated as somewhat separate behaviors instead of interdependent interaction. However, just as routine, everyday communication maintains the positive features of relationships, so it also holds the power to maintain the negative ones, sometimes without us even noticing this (Cupach & Spitzberg, 1998).

Therefore, rather than looking at single, isolated instances of bullying behavior, we should treat any individual perceptions of being bullied as signs of something being wrong in the whole relationship between the persons concerned. Bullying is not the only manifestation of destructive, unethical, and immoral communication in working life, but for an individual a bullying relationship is probably one of the most problematic. Although bullying may not be the only significant feature of this particular relationship, it might affect the way the individuals interact during the workday. In this chapter, this assumption will direct the investigation of bullying relationships.

Several findings concerning the perceived bullying target's problem-solving strategies suggest that a common way of dealing with bullying is to start with more active problem-solving strategies, such as confronting the perceived bully. However, if this rather risky strategy fails to succeed, the targets are described as becoming passive as they try to avoid future confrontations with the perceived bullies and direct their efforts toward being "invisible" to them (Hogh & Dofradottir, 2001; Zapf & Gross, 2001). But to succeed in appearing invisible to someone requires active and intentional strategies in working settings where co-worker interaction is required to get the work done.

### Strategic Maintenance of Bullying Relationships

In the following sections, the investigation of bullying relationships will be deepened with some insights provided by respondents (4 males, 8 females) working in various occupations who either perceived themselves as targets of bullying and/or had been accused of bullying by a co-worker. They are referred to as *participants in a bullying relationship* and their identification is based on their subjective views. In-depth interviews were designed to chart, for example, the respondents' views as to the nature of the bullying relationship they were involved in. The respondents also filled out a questionnaire covering their assessments of their own as well as the other participant's relational maintenance strategies. Some of them are discussed in the following sections. The quotations are translated from the original Finnish transcripts (NN = the other participant in the bullying relationship).

During the interviews, the nature of the relationship before experiences of bullying arose was compressed into expressions like "neutral," "workable," or "normal." The relationship was not, or even expected to be, similar to friendship; but was close enough to occasionally allow, for example, joking, and the

discussion of subjects unrelated to work. Even though individuals' interactions sometimes foreshadowed future difficulties, it took varied periods of time as well as various phases to develop to the point where the experiences of actual bullying occurred. Even then, the perception of bullying did not mean an end to the relationship, but was more like the starting point of a new period in it; a significant transition to a period of further interaction, which would be different as regards both quantity and quality.

The negative turning points in the relationships covered in the interviews often included work-related conflicts or long-term contradictions. This finding supports previous research on the origins of workplace bullying. For example, Einarsen (1999) has described bullying as a process with two possible origins. First, in predatory bullying the target is selected somewhat randomly as the target of hurtful acts. Second, in dispute-related bullying, the process begins after a conflict originally related to a task. Keashly and Nowell (2003) as well as Zapf and Gross (2001) concur with Einarsen as they note that if conflicts remain unresolved, they may give rise to a process eventually leading to bullying.

An attempt to describe or categorize bullying relationships presents a challenge, since not much is yet known about the associated relational characteristics. However, one way of conceptualizing them is to compare them with other types of relationships, such as friendships. When a relationship deepens to friendship, it affects both the quantity and quality of interaction. The participants voluntarily and actively seek each other's companionship and disclose more, and the interaction becomes informal to include humor, gossiping, and nicknaming as a way to the unique features of the relationship (Sias & Cahill, 1998).

The views offered by the respondents in my study indicated that instead of looking for each other's company the participants in a bullying relationship strove to avoid each other and the possible hurt resulting from the confrontations. If reducing the quantity of interaction by physical avoidance was not possible in work settings due to, for example, shared tasks or shifts, the avoidance was achieved by whatever other means were available. Thus, interaction between the participants was often restricted to only the necessary situations, and even these were kept as short and task-oriented as possible. So it seems that despite the constant hurt caused, bullying relationships are maintained for at least one obvious reason: there is no other choice due to shared office space.

To categorize these preceding actions, Hess' (2003) views on *undesired relationships* become highly applicable. What is essential to an undesired relationship is perceiving that one has no choice but to maintain it, at least in the near future, despite the lack of interest or affection felt toward the other person. Furthermore, the lack of an individual's free choice to be in a particular relationship will affect the way in which this relationship is maintained.



This view applies quite conveniently to the investigation of the maintenance of bullying relationships in the workplace, since a bullying relationship is, or has turned out to be, an unwanted one. Or, at least, the nature of the communication is unwanted. Perhaps the actual maintenance of bullying relationships can be regarded as voluntary because of, for example, the participants' willingness to continue working in the organization. Therefore, coping with the perceived bullying and maintaining the bullying relationship becomes necessary.

### Distancing in Bullying Relationships

Whereas any significant relationship causes occasional hurt, in an undesired relationship hurt seems to be a distinctive and a rather permanent characteristic. Hess (2003) has described several distancing tactics which individuals use to keep a difficult relationship in existence by reducing the amount of time devoted to it to a minimum, in order to reduce the stress caused. The tactics consist of strategic choices designed to either distance oneself from the unwanted partner physically, or when faced with that person, by other available means to reduce the duration of interaction, or to find means (for example, suitable topic of conversation) to reduce the closeness of the relationship. (For a more detailed description of distancing behaviors, see Hess, 2003.)

As the following quotations will illustrate, maintaining a bullying relationship requires strategic planning of the future interactions with the problematic party, or preferably how to avoid that interaction from happening. One of the participants described how "I chose alternative routes if I saw NN somewhere. I had no interest in approaching NN. Unfortunately." Also, if it was possible to perform one's tasks without meeting the other, for example, through arrangements concerning working hours, the respondents preferred this option. Leave of absence can be regarded as perhaps the most extreme form of avoidance. Again, the respondents occasionally chose to get necessary work-related information from alternative sources even if this required more effort. But, if and when contact with the other participant in the bullying relationship was unavoidable, the duration of such contact was kept as short as possible:

I have to admit that I am no longer communicating with NN if possible. I try to get support for my ideas from other channels and when I feel that I have that, I just go through with my plans [regarding a work task].

The first thing I did in the morning was to check whether NN's car was in the parking lot. The result pretty much affected the way I felt that day at work. A good thing was, though, that occasionally I was able to arrange my working hours so that I didn't have to be at the office at the same time as NN.

When looking at these views provided by the respondents, strategically-planned interaction and avoidance actually appear as somewhat active ways of maintaining, even protecting, the relationship and oneself from possible confrontations. Therefore, to describe the perceived targets as passive perhaps does no more than describe their outward appearance.

Another way to avoid confrontation and negative interaction with a problematic relational partner was for those who perceived themselves as targets of constant unjustified criticism to take care to ensure that the work they did was flawless. As one of them mentioned, "I wanted to be especially careful in everything I did. I even went to work on Sunday to get those papers straight. I didn't want to make any mistakes." This was a way to protect one's self-esteem and professional pride, but also to avoid situations where negative feedback was provided.

Preventive action was not limited to merely isolated strategic acts. Instead, it seems that as the time went on, "silent contracts" between the participants were created relating to, for example, the allowed and safe topics of discussion. Obviously, talking about the problems in the relationship was not regarded as one such. "We never talk about the problems in our relationship. We say nothing about those furious attacks or suchlike things" was one emblematic description. Therefore the maintenance of bullying relationships appears to be as much about what is left unsaid as it is about what is actually said. One of the participants described it as being "Good morning,' 'Thank you,' or 'Where's that file?' nothing more between us." Further, one manifestation of these silent contracts in action was pronounced politeness and professional, civil communication, and acting strictly by the social norms as "We are just acting polite, like always. All goes well, if we're just acting like two adults."

When we examine the perceived bullying behaviors reported in previous research, such as personal attacks, insults, humiliating criticism, denigration, and social isolation (Einarsen, 1999), the interaction in a bullying relationship does not appear to include any positive collaboration between the participants, only attacks and self-defense. But, as the views provided by the respondents often indicated, maintaining the problematic relationship required various forms of cooperation and effort to get the work done, together if necessary.

However, even strategic planning did not always result in a positive outcome, and just being polite did not always ensure peaceful interaction. Therefore, maintaining a bullying relationship was described as burdensome because of the inability to completely predict the response of the other. What added to the confusion was that occasionally an aggressive encounter was soon followed by something entirely the opposite. This forced the participants to reinvent their maintenance strategies:

NN talked about nice things. For a moment ago the situation was all different, NN was screaming at me like crazy. But now we had to stay in the same car and you can somehow sense that everything is not well. So I was just sitting and saying nothing.

NN was talking a lot and acting like normal people [laughter]. I was extremely surprised. NN was like a completely different person. NN was smiling and having a normal, peaceful conversation.

Usually I can act normally with people, there are no problems. But somehow with NN it's impossible to get inside NN's head. When you have absolutely no idea of what NN is thinking it's so difficult. Even though you're acting neutral and trying to say things nicely.

### Participants in Bullying Relationships

Maintaining unwanted relationships occasionally involves adopting hostile tactics toward the unwanted partner (Hess, 2003). Furthermore, as Andersson and Pearson (1999) have described, the escalation of workplace bullying can sometimes be seen as a spiral of uncivil behaviors where one person insults the other and the other responds. At this stage the participants seem to possess equal abilities to respond to each other and defend their own position. However, in time there comes a point where one party moves into a weaker position and possible perceptions of bullying take place. Taking this view a bit further, in the early stages it might be difficult to foretell which one, in the end, will perceive himself as the target of bullying. It also does not exclude the possibility that both participants are occasionally exposed to aggressive behaviors.

Contrary to what is the case with the research into the so-called bully-victims among school children (Solberg, Olweus, & Endresen, 2007), a characteristic feature of workplace bullying research is that the perceived targets' aggressive behaviors and counter-reactions have not been systematically investigated, except in somewhat exceptional environments, like that of a prison (Ireland & Archer, 2002). Leymann (1996) sees the perceived targets' aggressive behaviors as normal ways to react to bullying, but denies that they are intentionally provocative. Quite a limited, but interesting area of research discusses further the choices people make between forgiveness, reconciliation, and revenge when faced with incivilities or offensive behaviors in the workplace (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2001, 2006), problematic co-workers (Fritz, 1997), or workplace bullying (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006). These views offer useful insights in examining the interaction and the behaviors of both the perceived target and the perceived bully.

In the present study, the respondents' recruitment campaign asked for those who had either experienced bullying and/or had been accused of bullying. It was not a surprise that all the respondents who entered perceived them-



selves as targets. But interestingly, many of those same individuals had also been accused of bullying. This observation offered an interesting starting point for the discussion of the behavior of the perceived target.

Supporting previous descriptions of hostile tactics in unwanted relationship (Hess, 2003), those perceiving themselves as targets of bullying described their own actions as aggressive and intentionally insulting at times. Thus, the perceived targets are by no means incapable of acting unethically just because they are hurt. However, as the following example illustrates, this was described more as a method for coping, adduced when a respondent was asked about what gave him or her strength to handle the perceived bullying:

The fact was that I was needling NN. I had absolutely no respect for NN because NN had no respect for me. I embarrassed NN publicly because I was just so angry. I told NN off in front of those people, made an ass of NN. I know I am good at irritating people. And I have certainly done that, just to make them make mistakes.

Interestingly, in this particular case the respondent had been accused of bullying although he perceived himself as the target. So, as we have already seen, although it may be appealing to think of the perceived target as a helpless victim, in many cases this picture is less than the whole truth. Instead, as the perceived targets' answers in this study demonstrated, they were active and inventive survivors, who were willing and able to defend themselves in various ways until the very end, such as it turned out to be.

But this might come at a price; perhaps not acting in a helpless, passive victim-like way affects the way the third parties perceive the role-distribution in the bullying relationship and are consequently willing to offer their support. The exemplification by one of the respondents brings interesting new dimensions to the simple division into bullies and their targets and the way third parties might perceive the situation:

NN came there, crying, looking pretty. What can I do in a situation like that? I am a harsh and a strong person. Sure, I cry at home, sometimes all through the night. But at the office I won't do that, I will always stay cool....A co-worker said to me that it was extremely mean what I had done to the working community. I asked her, "What have I done?" She said, "Well, you know" and I responded, "No, I definitely don't know"....This one time I went for coffee and everyone in the lounge went quiet. NN was also sitting there, crying. I said to them, "You know, you don't have to stop talking just because I'm here. If you have been talking about me then continue, by all means. I'll just take my coffee and go." No one said anything and NN suddenly ran out the room. One of my long-time co-workers told me that NN had been saying stuff about me, how I interfered with NN's work and all and that NN can't take it anymore.

The problem with generalizations about role differentiation in workplace bullying is that they may not apply to all individual cases since, occasionally, it can be difficult to label the participants in a bullying relationship as being just

one or the other, the target or the bully. However, it seems that settling bullying cases is generally based on finding the one to blame and punish. Probably the labeling depends greatly on who you ask; the participants in a bullying relationship themselves or the third-party witnesses.

It seems understandable, that when one asks the perceived targets, who have without a doubt suffered from a stressful relationship, the opponents are often described as “narcissistic monsters, two-faced actors, and devil figures” (Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, & Alberts, 2006, p. 166). The label of workplace bully certainly paints a demonizing picture of the person accused of it. But a characteristic feature of bullying research is that typically information about the bullies is almost entirely built on the views provided by those perceiving themselves as their targets or by a third party, by anyone, in fact, except the accused bullies themselves (Rayner & Cooper, 2003).

It is easier to stigmatize the perceived bullies or see them as possessing characteristics that drive them to bully someone. But just to open some doors to future discussion, it might be in order to recognize that in some bullying relationships there is a bit more to the perceived bully and the target than meets the eye. There is no reason to assume that being labeled as a workplace bully may not be just as stressful an experience as perceiving oneself as a target and not being able to do anything about it. This probably explains why it was not exceptional that the respondents often described how the parties of the relationship equally blamed each other for bullying.

## Conclusion

Hurt is one of the many characteristics of every human relationship. However, in bullying relationships in the workplace it is more the rule than the exception that the interaction causes hurt to at least one of the participants. Bullying relationships in the workplace are far from ideal if secure and efficient working relationships are required.

Just by looking at the various forms of bullying, it seems clear that these relationships show only minimal evidence of communication of a kind likely to maintain a relationship in a positive way. However, workplace bullying processes have been reported to perpetuate themselves for years (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996; Leymann, 1996) and as this study proved, keeping the relationship in existence seems to generate creative ways in which to interact. Some of the strategies described by the respondents, such as avoidance, strategic topic avoidance, or mutual efforts for seemingly polite behavior have been discussed briefly in this chapter.

What seems to be somewhat a paradox is that bullying is a distinctive characteristic of these relationships even if, due to distancing, the hurtful en-

counters do not take place very often. Silence appears to be a significant factor in the maintenance of a bullying relationship.

Further, in a bullying relationship the features of relational communication that might develop the relationship in a positive way are absent. The participants do not talk about personal matters or use any other strategies related to the relational maintenance of positive relationships. However, contrary to what might be expected, extremely negative behaviors also often remain absent, since the participants will very often struggle to act politely and not let their negative emotions affect their behavior. Nonetheless, such relationships are not the same as neutral relationships, because they cause pain and stress.

The practical implications of the findings presented in this chapter are related to the early recognition of problems in co-worker relationships and understanding how they are manifested in the subtle routines of everyday communication. By paying attention to these social acts and supporting the participants in finding solutions to their conflicts, perhaps one key to preventing a relationship from turning into a bullying one can be found and ways of working with the problematic other that are at least tolerable may be found. Although bullying has been analyzed in this chapter on the dyadic level, the real solutions will involve the participation of the entire working community.

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