

## A Perfect Storm: The Rise in Claims of Bullying in the Context of Change<sup>1</sup>

Brigid Nossal and Fred Wright

### Abstract

This paper uses a systems psychodynamically informed approach to consider the significant breadth and complexity surrounding the issue of rising claims of bullying in organisations. It identifies multiple factors that coincide around role, system and context. In particular, it considers the role of management in contemporary organisations, tasked with implementing reforms in an environment characterised by continuous and turbulent change, with diminishing resources and increased accountabilities. Frameworks used to consider these issues include Emery and Trist's (1965) work on turbulence in organisational environments, White's (2013) work on the psychodynamics of bullying behaviour and Schwartz's (2011) recent work in which he claims an increase in bullying cases may be a simplification of more complex phenomena, including the rise of the 'pristine self'. In responding to the 'storm' conditions the authors endorse Winnicott's (1971) work on the importance of the holding environment, as the basis upon which managers and organisations should consider their responses.

Keywords: Bullying, Management, Change, Systems Psychodynamics

### 1. Introduction

Conversations about workplace behaviour and bullying invariably give rise to strong emotions. People often reflect passionately upon a personal experience of being bullied, of witnessing bullying, or on the increasing incidence of claims against managers of workplace bullying. The topic of bullying evokes such great passion because it gets us in touch with a range of primitive experiences about conflict, vulnerability, loss, dependency and betrayal. The authors have a keen interest in this area, and have consulted to an increasing number of professionals caught up in the 'bullying' phenomenon; either through claims being made against them or by those wishing to bring claims. In this paper we explore some of the complexity surrounding this issue by taking a systems psychodynamically informed approach.

In Australia, claims of bullying (and psychological injury) in the workplace appear to be on the rise, with high profile cases being regularly reported in the media and a number of government

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper is pending publication in the OPUS journal, *Organisational and Social Dynamics*, 2015

---

inquiries looking into this area<sup>2</sup>. Recently, a case involving an allegation of bullying in the workplace came before the Fair Work Commission (FWC), which is Australia's national workplace relations tribunal. New workplace laws have recently been enacted which enable workers who believe that they have been bullied at work to apply to the FWC for an order to stop the bullying (FWC, 2014).

This case was the first contested bullying case determined by the FWC and was unusual in that it involved a manager who claimed that she was bullied both by her subordinates and her superiors in the wake of unsuccessful bullying claims brought against her. Ms SB had recently been appointed as a team leader in an organisation that was undergoing significant organisational change. One of SB's team members initially made an internal bullying complaint about SB's behaviour, which was subsequently investigated by the employer and dismissed. Shortly thereafter, another of SB's team members also made a complaint about bullying by SB and again this was investigated by the employer, with the result that it was partly upheld and partly dismissed (FWC, 2104).

It was following the outcome of the second internal investigation that SB made a bullying complaint to the FWC, alleging bullying by her subordinates, and bullying by management. She claimed that, amongst a range of behaviours, her subordinates had bullied her by making complaints against her and that her managers had bullied her by failing to adequately support her in the face of these bullying complaints against her.

Whilst the Commission ultimately found that the bullying case was not proven, the circumstances detailed in this case are strikingly similar to a growing number of matters that both authors have consulted to. These included supervisors / managers new to their role and tasked with bringing about significant structural changes within the organisation. The affected staff often felt 'bullied' by the new manager, while the manager felt isolated and unsupported by the organisation.

The authors were initially interested in considering the question of what it is about the role of manager in contemporary organisations that sees them taking up their new roles in ways that

---

<sup>2</sup> The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment Report of October 2012, *Workplace Bullying, We just want it to stop*, The Australian Productivity Commission's (2010) report entitled *Performance Benchmarking of Australian business regulation: Occupational Health and Safety*, the Safety, Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 1988 Review, Café Vamp, Kristie Fraser-Kirk V David Jones,).

---

may leave them vulnerable to allegations of bullying or, which indeed could be construed by their staff as bullying behaviour. We were also interested in the interactions between role, system and context and how these may be contributing to the dynamics. However, during the course of our exploration, we came to appreciate the significant breadth and complexity surrounding this issue. It seems that multiple factors coincide to create what might be considered ‘ideal conditions’ for incubating the *experience* of being bullied or harassed, or of acting in a way that could be experienced as being bullied or harassed – in short, a ‘perfect storm’ for promoting the phenomena associated with claims of bullying.

During our work we became acutely aware that for both staff and managers, the emotional experiences resulting from inappropriate behaviour in the workplace or of having an allegation of bullying made against them, combined with the cumbersome organisational responses to these situations, was extremely traumatic and damaging. Indeed, more often than not, the impact of the organisational response to the incidents was significantly more damaging than the original behaviour, which, in the authors’ view, often did not meet the legal threshold for establishing a case of bullying. In fact, much of the behaviour that was complained about appeared to be amenable to alternative dispute resolution if the system was able to engage it in a timely and informal manner.

One accused senior manager described their experience,

*I felt completely hollowed out, like a shell just going through the motions. I felt no desire except to sleep or kill myself.*

It is clear that being caught up in this storm is incredibly costly, resulting in a profound impact that is felt both individually and organisationally. For this manager, not only were sleep patterns disturbed and the capacity to focus on work disrupted, his trust in the organisation was completely shattered. The ‘victims’ of the behaviour have reported similar experiences.

The authors not only witnessed the cost to the individuals they were working with but could also estimate the significant concomitant cost to the organisations through loss of productivity, poor morale and time spent in documenting and either pursuing or defending the claims. In many of these cases, skilled professional staff were lost to the organisation, with the process of transitioning disenfranchised staff out of the organisation, and the impact upon team dynamics compounding the deleterious effect on the organisation (Jenkins et al 2011).

---

In this paper we attempt to bring together some of the multiple and coinciding factors at work, developing a tentative explanatory hypothesis, and considering what we see as some of the work required by organisations to respond effectively to these issues. Specifically we begin by identifying and analysing some common elements to the bullying claims narrative. These elements are embedded in the Australian context, using Emery and Trist's (1965) work on turbulence in organisational environments to understand the context of change. We then consider White's (2013) work on the psychodynamics of bullying behaviour and Schwartz's (2011) work on the rise of the pristine self to assist in understanding some of the dynamics that occur around the phenomena associated with bullying claims. We conclude by considering Winnicott's (1971) work and highlight the importance of the holding environment for managers and organisations for responding to these 'storm' conditions.

We begin with a brief outline of factors in common across many of the cases we have consulted to and explore some contextual and systems psychodynamic factors that might contribute to creating the conditions for this 'perfect storm'.

## **2. The Common Narrative**

In each of the cases we were consulting to, there were common elements to the narrative. They involved a manager who had recently been appointed to a new role, with an assumed or explicit brief and a mandate to bring about change. The imperative for this change, in the broadest terms, was the organisation's need to adapt to radically altered environmental circumstances (political, economic, practice-based and/or social). The need for change was considered urgent and was often seen a matter of the organisation's survival.

A particular feature of the expected changes, although not always clearly articulated, was the expectation to create a working culture that was more flexible, more efficient and more accountable. This almost inevitably involved being able to "do more with less".

A further striking feature in common with each of these cases was the manager (whether CEO, Executive Director, Director or more junior manager) seemed to find him/herself isolated, experiencing little support or engagement from those more senior to them, while managing and giving effect to the change process.

---

The new managers' reported inheriting a work group and situation that was not performing optimally and which they perceived as having been poorly managed by their predecessors. They would often comment that issues were inevitably not dealt with well in the past (if at all) and that this reflected a previous management style that was typically 'avoidant'. When reflecting upon this in role analysis or consultation, it was common for a manager to openly express their contempt and sometimes outrage for the moribund state in which they found the system and the scope and scale of the changes necessary to effect the requisite adaptation; in structure, processes and culture.

Most commonly, there was a complaint by both the new manager and some of the staff that there had previously been few frameworks for accountability. For example, staff may have experienced only superficial performance oversight and feedback, and often none at all. Goals were often informally identified with staff often left to define the boundaries around their work and organisational output being only superficially measured or monitored, if at all.

It appears that outgoing managers and their staff had been working in times of less constrained circumstances. That is, there was little to suggest that given the previous 'order of things' managers and staff were considered inadequate to the task. However, given a changing set of circumstances, a 'new order' of things was required, and it was considered by the manager that there was some degree of urgency in this.

These managers seemed to work from the assumption that the facts of the changed external reality and a reason-based and well-argued rationale would be sufficient to bring people along with the changes, within the limited timeframe. There appeared to be little, if any, thought given to systems psychodynamic challenges, such as the strong feelings that might be evoked by a new manager coming in and immediately introducing major change. There also appeared to be a certain level of naivety that it was possible to effect cultural change this way. If any reflection did occur, pressures within the system, from more senior management or stakeholders (or indeed from the staff) to effect the changes quickly seemed to prevent the necessary time and space from being allocated to this.

As it happened, in the cases that we consulted to, a majority of people appeared to make the necessary adaptations to meet the new circumstances (not necessarily without complaint, but with compliance). However, in every case, there was a small number of people who exhibited an

---

adverse response to the changes. These people responded in a variety of ways to the implementation of change by the new manager and as a result of their response they were often given negative labels such as the ‘vexatious non-performers’, ‘change resisters’, or workplace ‘bullies’. Claims against the new manager of bullying or harassment were most likely to come from these individuals. An important consideration here is what was being acted out for the group in these situations?

The impact of the organisational response to these claims for both the manager and the staff member was traumatic. There was often an ongoing series of events for participants with reactions cycling through disbelief, outrage, anger, terror, hurt, betrayal, sleeplessness, anxiety, powerlessness, hopelessness (to name a few). The experience of damage and trauma in many cases ran quite deep. For example, one manager interviewed a year after the bullying claims had been lodged said,

*It’s still unsafe; it still feels unsafe. I probably feel like I can’t trust anyone in the workplace with how difficult it is and how difficult people [the staff she manages] are.*

It is interesting to note that despite numerous challenges that arose when implementing these changes, including the significantly adverse reaction from some staff, the managers pressed on with their task, single minded in their determination to reach an imagined goal. Whilst there appeared to be data to alert the manager to the need to pause for reflection, like Oedipus on his doomed journey they appeared unable to find the space to make meaning of these markers.

Managers often reported that they considered that their capacity for work had been adversely impacted. However, from what they reported, appraisals received by the Board or executive management over this time (and subsequent to the claims) were favourable. That is, performance was considered at least adequate and there was little, if any, attention given to the emotional ‘fall out’ for the manager and the staff.

The managers in question reported a reluctance to speak about their experiences with senior management or peers, seeing it as having the potential to reflect poorly upon their capabilities. The culture that they were a part of seemed to suggest that it was their job to deal with the issues with senior management seemingly disengaged or disinterested in the process. It appeared that there was an unstated message not to bother senior management with the detail and the managers themselves accepted this.

---

Given that we are talking about a systemic context of turbulence, it seems reasonable to surmise that this more senior management were similarly struggling with the pressures associated with implementing major change under straightened circumstances. Under these conditions many of the interactions that occur are superficial and transactional, creating the environment that White (2013) describes as the kind of 'vacuum of support' in which bullying might thrive.

### **3. A Brief Analysis**

Our initial exploration of these matters focused upon the experience of the managers in the bullying dynamic, as these represented our clients. In many of the cases we were involved with, the scale of requisite changes to be implemented, and the tight timeframes for these, appeared unrealistic and even somewhat grandiose. The significance of the task was increased by the fact that there was an expectation, often implicit, that workplace culture would change and that long standing HR issues would be dealt with. This was despite the fact that a range of previous management had been unsuccessful in tackling these complex tasks.

Often, new managers would begin in the early stages of taking up their roles by initiating significant change, taking little time to understand the history of the work group or to build trust in workplace relationships. It appeared that that there was either very little time or it was not considered a priority to 'negotiate' a new psychological contract with staff.

In the face of the scale of the challenge that the new manager is appointed to take on, we hypothesise that some unconscious process may be aroused in which the managers imagine themselves capable of achieving fantastical things. A level of frustration is aroused when others cannot see or get in the way of this vision. Combined with this, and perhaps fuelled by it, a defensive attitude arises that presents as either contempt for the past or at least a diminishing of its importance. The current state of the organisation is seen to be in need of quick change and the people that they are tasked to manage, who may show scepticism or dissent, are seen to represent an unwanted past; the old, dysfunctional culture in need of quick surgery.

This is a complex and challenging environment for a new manager in which a number things may be happening including: the pressure of the external reality; an unconscious awareness of the impossibility of the task; a fear of failure; narcissism and feelings of isolation and persecution from both above and below. This mix may elicit what we understand as a subtle and uncharacteristic righteous authoritarianism in the way the new managers take up their roles and

---

embark on the task of bringing about change. This authoritarianism may be overt or hidden, but either way, the staffing group feels the impact of it.

It is within this context that staff can easily develop a sense of being adversely judged about both past and present performance, with some staff exhibiting associated feelings of shame and/or outrage (among other feelings). At a deeper level, we speculate that the failure of the new manager to acknowledge and praise the achievements of the past may arouse unconscious feelings of persecution and fear of annihilation. This was the case where the history of the group or organisation formed an important part of people's identity, because it involved events that were traumatic (such as working through bushfires or floods) and that required 'heroic' efforts to take up difficult roles, or where historical events that were felt to be traumatic were experienced by group members (such as previous restructures in which many colleagues lost their jobs).

Through a group process of splitting and projective identification (Bion, 1961 & Klein, 1932), one or a small number of staff may become 'filled up' with these feelings and 'act them out' on behalf of the group. Roles that can be taken up include that of scapegoat, or defender of the group history.

Gold (2010) has described group processes of this kind as like an unconscious 'transfer of evil', a form of scapegoating behaviour in which the individual, filled up with the group's unwanted and split off projections, is like the sacrificial goat in Leviticus that gets loaded up with all the 'sins' and 'evils' of the group and sent off into the wilderness. In this process, *'The setting up of others to take the blame and therefore of evading personal responsibility'* (p. 14) serves the purpose of 'cleansing' the group of its unwanted feelings. It is, we speculate, an unconscious process in which an individual group member (or, indeed the new manager) is 'sacrificed' as a substitute for group members acknowledging and working through powerful and unwanted feelings of anxiety and loss evoked by the way in which the new manager takes up their role or the changes that they are instituting, or indeed both.

We can also attribute to the new manager, the failure of serving as a 'good-enough' (Winnicott 1971) 'container' (Bion 1970) to enable the group to work through its anxieties. We believe that primitive states of mind are being evoked in both the victim and alleged perpetrator of the bullying, and even in more senior management who cannot see these dynamics unfolding and do not appear to have the resources to intervene. Of importance in the system, is that the speed with

---



which the environment was moving meant that there was little, if any, time or space to build (or rebuild) the foundations upon which supporting relationships could be established, nor was there time set aside for reflection and sense-making for staff, including no time to acknowledge and mourn the past. Not surprisingly the result was, at least in one case, a kind of wholesale ‘hysteria’, in which the manager became the target of multiple accusations. In the other situations bullying claims were made against the managers.

#### **4. The Australian Context**

Workplaces across Australia are subject to the same ‘traumas’ and ‘pressures’ of what is commonly described as our ‘turbulent world’. As Brunning and Perini (2010) note, our contemporary world is,

*...confused and terrified by reality, where feelings are uncontained, people abandoned to their own anxieties by uncertain or unreliable leaders, and disappearing institutions.*  
(p.xxiv)

Trist and Emery (1965) were probably the first to coin the term ‘turbulence’ to describe the ‘Causal Texture of Organizational Environments’ that we now find ourselves in. Their descriptions and predictions about it have proven uncannily accurate. They describe the turbulent environment as increasingly uncertain and unpredictable as organisations operate within a global context of enmeshed interdependencies between economic organisations, legislation and public regulation. Further, there is an

*‘...increasing reliance on research and development to achieve the capacity to meet competitive challenge. This leads to a situation in which a change gradient is continuously present in the environmental field.’ (P.10)*

Were they writing today, they might have gone on to say that this change gradient has become ever steeper with the nature of turbulence in the field (influenced as it is by the speed with which products and technology become redundant and are replaced, information is disseminated and where growth threatens to outstrip capacity in terms of the planet’s natural resources) increasing exponentially. Perhaps turbulence has become too gentle a descriptor and it needs replacing with something stronger, like turmoil or mayhem. Against this background of turbulence is the ongoing ‘fallout’ from the Global Financial Crisis. In the first few years after the GFC, the Australian economy seemed somewhat protected from the worst impact. Our trade with China

---

in natural resources was largely responsible for this. In the past two years, however our economic growth has declined.

In the Government sector there has been a succession of both State and Commonwealth government budget deficits that have informed the view that there is urgency in reducing the growth in the rate of expenditure across major program areas. With sluggish growth in consumption, Governments across Australia have also had to address reduced revenue from GST receipts. Consequently, public sector organisations have had to continuously contract out, amalgamate or reorganise in an attempt to respond to ongoing budgetary pressures. This has resulted in significant reductions in the public sector across Australia with, for example, the Queensland Public Service reportedly reducing staff by 15,000, NSW by 20,000 and in Victoria over 5000 (Brisbane Times, 19/09/2012). In the 2014 budget, the Commonwealth government is also proposing to cut funding, consolidate agencies and reduce the aggregate size of departments, resulting in thousands of further job losses.

The flavour of all of these changes spells the end of 20 years of uninterrupted economic growth in Australia, with the budgetary position of all governments reportedly under severe pressure. Against this background of pressure to reduce the public sector wages bill and the cost of social expenditure, the urgency with which structural reform (including significant redundancies) is being implemented creates substantial risks, particularly as containing processes that support staff and managers to make meaning of and engage with these reforms, are often not considered a priority, if they are considered at all.

It is hypothesised that the significant turbulence results in many of the problems that arise being 'wicked,' in that there is no easy answer and each problem is linked to a range of other problems. Despite the need for a 'negative capability' in this environment, that is the capacity to sit in a space of not knowing, what often occurs is a flight toward acting, which we hypothesise is a defense against the complexity of the issues that confront Western governments and organisations working within them (Game 2013).

This defense involves action, rather than sitting in the strong emotions that arise within this context and does not allow time for the creation of a holding environment in which meaning can be made of the enormity of these challenges and the strong emotions that they evoke. It is in this

---

environment that people respond (or perhaps react) from isolated and highly defended positions. The conditions within this environment support behaviours that form the basis of bullying.

### **5. Bullying in the Australian context?**

Returning to the subject of our paper, we note reports of high rates of bullying and / or psychological injury in the Australian work force. Indeed the Productivity Commission in their submission to the recent Commonwealth Government Inquiry (2012) into bullying suggests that rates of bullying could be over 15% at a cost to business of between \$6 to \$36 Billion dollars per annum (paras 1.25, 1.31).

A Canberra Law Review article cites survey results in which 21% of respondents said that they had experienced bullying at work (Esteal & Hampton, 2011). Similarly recent reports from the NSW & Victorian Public Service Authorities note a high prevalence of reported inappropriate workplace behaviour (but interestingly a low incidence of the use of dispute resolution processes). (Public Service Commissioner N.S.W. 2012)

In January this year, an amendment was made to the Fair Work Act (2009). Part of the intention was to make it easier for workers to make claims in the event that they felt that they were being bullied at work. The FWC website (2014) notes;

A worker who has been bullied at work can apply to the Commission for an order to stop the bullying.

Under the Fair Work Amendment Act bullying at work occurs when:

- an individual or group repeatedly behaves unreasonably towards a worker or group of workers at work, and
- the behaviour creates a risk to health and safety.

Bullying doesn't include:

- one off instances of insensitivity or rudeness, or
- reasonable management activities carried out in a reasonable manner.

This definition of workplace bullying is extremely broad and in a legal sense quite 'weak'. That is, it is open textured and in many respects ambiguous, turning on subjective views of what is 'reasonable' and how a 'reasonable person' might behave or respond in a given situation. The steep rise in the number of claims in recent times leaves open the question of whether part of what is occurring is that with a more accessible route to making claims, 'bullying' becomes the

---

term and pathway of choice for staff to give expression to the stresses and strains (or indeed distress) that they are experiencing in the workplace.

It is submitted that the term itself is inflammatory and perhaps becomes a ready container (in Bion's sense) in the absence of any other, for the persecutory anxiety suffered by people in organisations under the complex and changing circumstances that we have described.

One of our hypotheses is that turbulence in the workplace, combined with the factors outlined in the new manager scenario, together with a lack of appreciation for the importance of holding and containment, creates ideal conditions for paranoid–schizoid anxiety to thrive. The problem with the use of a bullying claim against a manager, in an attempt by staff to deal with and have acknowledged their anxieties, is that once a claim is made, the legal and regulatory frameworks dictate that it must follow a particular and defined trajectory or 'train'.

For example, once a bullying claim is formally raised it must be investigated. During the investigation process the manager is disallowed from speaking with the complainant, thus precluding any opportunity for mutual understanding and meaning making, as a pathway to reparation. Once this train departs, the process follows down an adversarial track, taking both the claimant and the accused to a designated destination of either a win or a loss. Whatever the result, one thing seems certain, rather than this process providing a remedy for the emotional trauma suffered by both parties, or some recoup in the cost suffered by the organisation (both financially and in the damage to the trust in workplace culture), it does the opposite. It is, rather, a train wreck, where even those who win, report dissatisfaction with the process (Public Sector Standards Commissioner Victoria, 2009).

We now give brief consideration to the dynamics of workplace bullying as another factor in the perfect storm.

## **6. The Psychodynamics of Workplace Bullying**

Sheila White (2013) provides an accessible and thorough investigation of this topic in her recently published book, *An introduction to the Psychodynamics of Workplace Bullying*. We commend it to you. For our purposes, a few points warrant consideration as they provide some confirmation for what we tentatively suggest in this paper. First, White maintains that 'bullying occurs around vacuums of support within organisations'. Further, the phenomenon of bullying

---

represents what she calls a 'futile search for recognition' (p. xiv). Lack of support and the seeking of recognition are readily identifiable features of the cases we have been consulting to.

White postulates that an 'embryonic' potential for either bullying or being a victim of bullying exists within individuals in the workplace and that 'these embryos will only grow into their roles of bully and victim if the organisational context ... facilitates that development' (p. 79). It is our hypothesis that the organisational and contextual circumstances that we have described certainly lend themselves to the realisation of this potential.

According to White, 'the dynamics of change could play a key role in the establishment of bullying scenarios, particularly when there is a rush to implement change and the impact of change on employees is ignored' (p.170). The circumstances in the cases that we have consulted to strongly support White's correlation with organisational change processes.

What we consider interesting, in the cases that we consulted to, is the difficulty we had in discerning who was the victim and who was the bully. In cases where the manager was notionally the accused, there is no doubt that their felt experiences closely resembled those reported by the victim in terms of his or her level of distress and suffering. Clients described feeling 'devastated' or 'gutted'; they felt like their whole identity was at risk of imploding. As some described it, they were also in no doubt that their accusers were similarly deeply distressed and affected.

In some cases, these managers might be described as 'abrasive' according to Crawshaw's (2010) definition, in that they 'cause[s] emotional distress sufficient to disrupt organisational functioning' (p.60). In other cases, there was no evidence of bullying or abrasive behaviour and under formal investigation, the behaviour did not satisfy the current definitions of bullying – vague and inclusive as they may be. However, what they clearly *were* guilty of was a failure to create an environment that allows for reflection and meaning making of experiences; what White (2013, p.87) describes as an 'oasis of time and calm where conversation can take place'. White suggests, and the authors strongly agree, that this is so critical to the containing function of management, however it is a function that becomes lost in these severe storm conditions.

If one 'bully' is to be highlighted, we might say that it is indifferent reality itself, mercilessly imposing the pressures and burdens of these turbulent times. Notwithstanding, reality has always been indifferent and former times have been much harsher than those we currently face (we think of Taylor's time and motion-oriented workplaces, times of war or the Great Depression as

---

a few examples of difficult times). In advanced economies such as Australia's, from an historical perspective, this period of globalisation has generated unprecedented wealth in capital accumulation and unprecedented increases in per capita income. Given this we became curious about the work of Howard Schwartz and his arguments about the rise in the predominance of the 'pristine self' (Schwartz, 2011). We consider this to be another possible variable in this 'perfect storm'.

## 7. The Rise of the 'Pristine Self'

Schwartz (1997, 2011) argues the case that contemporary society is in the thrall of what he describes as anti-Oedipal psychology. In brief, Schwartz argues that the essential counterbalancing forces of 'the father' (reality orientation) and 'the mother' (love and nurture) have been progressively eroded and replaced by a predominance of the 'primordial mother' and 'the pristine (narcissistic) self'.

As Schwartz (2003) puts it, *'the role of the father is to represent indifferent external reality within the family so that, by introjecting him, by coming to see things from his point of view, the children can learn to cope with that reality'* (p. 186). This internalisation of the reality-oriented father (also referred to as the development of a superego) is what enables the child to grow out of its primary narcissism and its 'sense of infinite entitlement' to love, nurture, attention and protection.

Schwartz argues that through the denigration and destruction of 'the father' this normal process of development and its civilising influence has been interrupted, allowing the 'pristine self' to flourish.

As Schwartz explains,

*'My contention is that the normalization of the pristine self takes the normal aggression of human interaction and sees it as bullying. That is why, among children, it is seen everywhere. Yet anti-oedipal psychology, by normalising the pristine self, deprives us of the possibility of binding that aggression and turning it into socially useful form. This is what makes civilisation possible. It also offers the possibility of creating a sense of self-worth for ourselves through our accomplishment. When the pristine self is normalized however, the effect is not so much to protect us from bullies, as to make bullies of us all.'* (2011, p. 8).

These hypotheses of Schwartz's are not intended to detract from the abhorrence of real instances of bullying, nor, as we have described them, the real experiences of distress. Rather we seek to

---

float the idea that it seems plausible that, at an unconscious societal level, something is going on to explain the prevalence of bullying claims and the fairly widespread experience in organisations of a need to be protected from a reality which, although no more harsh than it has ever been, is undergoing rapid change.

When Schwartz presented his paper on bullying in 2011, he cited 8,250,000 Google search results for the word bullying as exemplary of our current preoccupation with it. In June 2014, this same search brought up 26,400,000 and two weeks later the figure has increased to 28,000,000. A recent Harvard Business Review discussion forum on the topic has been inundated with contributions. Yet Schwartz proposes that there is no indication that real bullying is any more prevalent than it has ever been, rather, our preoccupation with it continues to grow. What can explain this? This case for the rise of the pristine self seems to offer something important to the exploration and certainly warrants further consideration.

Alongside the hypothesis about the rise of the pristine self, another factor in our ‘perfect storm’ is an identifiable absence of good enough holding environments in contemporary organisations when trying to implement major change. These two factors (primary narcissism on the one hand and a failure of holding environments on the other) are not necessarily at odds. Rather, when combined, they might explain the degree of toxicity and paranoid anxiety in the experiences that some staff and managers are having in organisations.

### **8 - Understanding the importance of a ‘good-enough’ holding environment**

In the cases that we were consulting to, there was often an absence in the creation of a ‘good-enough’ holding environment in which staff and managers feel encouraged and enabled to take the time required to reflect upon and make meaning of the challenges of these turbulent times. Eric Miller (1995), one of the ‘fathers’ of systems psychodynamic thinking, was probably one of the first to identify and adapt Winnicott’s concept of the ‘holding environment’ as an essential condition for people being able to take up their role, especially in turbulent times.

Winnicott (1971) talks about the ‘good-enough’ mother who creates the environment needed to facilitate development. She does this by mediating the unpredictable elements in the environment, including her own aggression (and internal pressure to retaliate) against the demands of the baby. She allows her baby to express his feelings, is able to tolerate them and make meaning of them by not becoming overwhelmed by the strongly expressed emotions.

---

As the baby grows, the mother facilitates a gradual shift from total dependence to independence by providing an iterative process of disillusionment (or failure / or reality) in not responding to all of the needs / demands of the baby. This allows the baby to tolerate the frustrations of the outside world and understand that they are not omnipotent. Gradual doses of reality make it possible for the baby to manage the trauma of the loss of omnipotence and results in growth and development.

Winnicott notes that this development (and learning to tolerate frustration and anxiety) is a lifelong process. We hope that you can see the parallel here in terms of the requisite role of the manager for his or her staff, especially during a change process in which sentient groups are dispersed, many people may lose their jobs and new work systems and processes are being introduced. This degree of change is an example of what Miller (1995) describes as 'explosive instability' and under these circumstances the capacity of the manager to create a holding environment that allows meaning making is crucial. In its absence, it is possible to see how uncontained anxieties may flourish and grow, in some people, becoming manifest as extreme and unmanageable distress. We submit that in this vulnerable state the conditions are ripe for creating either a victim or a perpetrator of bullying.

When a manager comments to a supervisee, who raises issues about the large volume of work, 'You think that you have a high workload, you should see mine!' the manager is a bit like the mother who is unable to mediate her own aggression and 'acts out' the desire to retaliate against demands for support (or holding).

And we ask, what is 'good-enough' in an environment where a manager might also have to contend with excessive demands from the 'pristine self' employee who sees any dose of reality as an attack? One manager queried, 'how much is enough time to talk about concerns regarding the changes and when do I say that is it, we need to move on!' It seems hard for managers to find the right balance between good enough holding and offering graduated doses of reality such that their staff can tolerate them.

In the current environment, it is hard to be vulnerable, to express feelings and explore reactions in the context of the supervisory relationship. This is because there is little time to build the foundations of a trusting relationship. The current environment (fast paced, time limited, outcome oriented, power / control dominated) militates against this. At the same time,

---



managers are so filled up with their own pressures and cannot tolerate the strong emotions evoked without becoming overwhelmed and at times driven by their own aggression about the challenging and unpredictable world. In this environment they may also be driven to retaliate. This might give rise to the suspected subtle authoritarianism that was referred to earlier in this paper.

At all levels of the hierarchy there appears to be an absence of appropriate holding or support. Indeed there appears to be a view that once people reach a certain position in the hierarchy they are not in need of holding or containing. There is little evidence to support this view. What we know is that when staff and managers cannot explore / play / reflect they experience the environment as persecutory. Anxiety and anger may be projected out. They are not being heard or understood, they do not feel respected. They are squashed down and made to conform. In their terms, they are being bullied.

## **9 Conclusion**

In this paper we set out to consider more deeply some of the complex dynamics at play involving role, system and context with a view to building greater understanding of the relationship between rising allegations of bullying in the workplace and organisational change. We described these dynamics as creating something of a 'perfect storm' in which paranoid schizoid thinking can readily develop. We suggest that in seeking shelter from these 'storm conditions', managers engage in a flight to action, rather than taking time to tune into to the experience and the needs of their staff, think about the challenges presented by the change process and act from a more considered and thoughtful position. As we have sought to describe, the consequences of this omission of creating a 'good-enough' environment and sufficient reflective space can be devastating for claimants and managers alike and the cost to the organisation is significant.

We are aware of many papers or book chapters in the field (eg. Miller, 1995, Bar-Lev Elieli, 2001, Long, 2013, Obholzer and Miller, 2004, Nutkevitch, 1998, Ambrose, 2001, French, 1997 and many more) that make reference in one way or another to turbulent times and that highlight the importance of the containing function of the manager, the need for facilitating environments, reflective practice and the creation of transitional spaces. White (2013) describes this as,

*A space to reflect and play with experiences of change is needed if healthier intrapsychic and intersubjective rhythms necessary to creative responses are to be found (p.127).*

---

These ‘remedies’ or minimum conditions create a supportive and healthy workplace environment. They have been written about exhaustively and there is ample evidence to support their importance. Given this, the question for the authors remains; why is it that when these responses are so well known, there is a continual failure to apply this thinking?

There is something about the conditions of this ‘perfect storm’ that makes the task of creating and holding such an environment extremely difficult. The challenge remains to convince managers as they face the ever-present likelihood of change initiatives that the cost and risks associated with ignoring these findings are great. Turbulent environments are the new constant, so we hope that this paper goes some way towards building a convincing case in favour of managers committing to creating healthier work environments.

## References

- Amado, G. & Ambrose, A. (Eds.) (2001). *The Transitional Approach to Change*. London: Karnac Books.
- Bar-Lev Elieli, R. (2001) An Organisation Looks at Itself: Psychoanalytic and Group Relations Perspectives on Facilitating Organisational Transition in Eds L.J. Gould, L. F. Stapley, & M. Stein, *The Systems Psychodynamics of Organizations: Integrating the Group Relations Approach, Psychoanalytic, and Open Systems Perspectives*. London: H. Karnac (Books) Limited. 67-90.
- Bion, W. R. (1961). *Experiences In Groups*. London: Routledge.
- Bion, W. R. (1970). *Attention and Interpretation: A Scientific Approach to Insight in Psycho-Analysis and Groups*. London: Tavistock Publications Limited.
- Commonwealth Government Inquiry (2012) *Workplace Bullying, We just want it to stop*. House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment, October 2012
- Crawshaw, L., (2010) *Coaching Abrasive Leaders: Using Action research to Reduce Suffering and Increase Productivity in Organizations*, International Journal of Coaching in Organizations, Issue 29 8(1) 60-77.
- Emery, F.E. & Trist, E.L. *The Causal Texture of Organizational Environments*. Human Relations February 1965 vol. 18 no. 1, 21-32
- Esteal, P. & Hampton, J., (2011) Canberra Law Review. Vol. 10, Issue 2
- Fair Work Commission (2014) <https://www.fwc.gov.au/resolving-issues-disputes-and-dismissals/workplace-issues-disputes/anti-bullying>. Accessed 07/08/2014
- French, R. (1997). *The Teacher as Container of Anxiety: Psychoanalysis and the Role of Teacher*. Journal of Management Education, 21(4), 483-495.
- Jenkins, M, Winefield, H & Sarris, A. (2011) ‘Consequences of being accused of workplace bullying:
-

*An exploratory study*'. International Journal of Workplace Health Management. Vol. 4 No. 1, 2011. pp. 33-47

Game, E T. (et al) (2013) *Conservation in a wicked complex world; challenges and solutions*. Conservation Letters vol 7, Issue 3 (2013) Wiley & Sons

Gold, S (2010) *The Transfer of Evil*. Paper presented at ISPSO 2010 Annual Meeting Symposium, Denmark.

Klein, M. (1932). *The Psycho-Analysis of Children*. London: Vintage.

Long, S. (2013) *Beyond identifying social defences: 'Working through' and lessons from people whispering*. Paper presented at the Colloquium on Social Defences against Anxiety held at Oxford University, September 2013.

Miller, E., (1995) *The Healthy Organization for the 1990s in Ed. S. Long*, International Perspectives in Times of Turbulence. Hawthorn: Swinburne Press

Nutkevitch, A. (1998). *The Container and its Containment: A Meeting Space for Psychoanalytic and Open Systems Theories*. Paper presented at the ISPSO Symposium, Jerusalem.

Obholzer, A. and Miller, S. (2004) Leadership, followership and facilitating the creative workplace, in Eds C. Huffington, D. Armstrong et al. *Working Below the Surface: The Emotional Life of Contemporary Organizations*. Karnac: London 33-48.

Public Sector Standards Commissioner Victoria, (2009) *Taking the heat out of Workplace Disputes. A discussion paper*.

Public Service Commission N.S.W., (2012) People Matter Employee Survey. Pp 24,25

Schwartz, H. (1997) *Psychodynamics of Political Correctness*, Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 33 (2): 132-148.

Schwartz, H. (2001) *The Revolt of the Primitive: An Inquiry into the Roots of Political Correctness and Primitive Feminism*. Paperback edition, with a new introduction, Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, September 2003. Hardcover edition, Westport, CT: Praeger, May 2001.

Schwartz, H. (2011) *Anti-oedipal psychology and the crisis of hope: Psychodynamics of the anti-bullying movement and implications for organization*. International Society for the Psychoanalytic Study of Organizations. Melbourne, Australia, June 2011.

White, S. (2013) *An Introduction to the Psychodynamics of Workplace Bullying*. Karnac Books: London

Winnicott, D. W. (1971). *Playing and Reality*. London: Routledge Classics.