Doctoral Students' Experiences of Supervisory Bullying

Suzanne E. Morris
The University of Queensland,
Brisbane QLD 4072 Australia
E-mail: suzanne.morris@uq.edu.au

ABSTRACT

The power dynamic in the student-supervisor relationship is perceived to be unequal, with a good relationship between a student and supervisor important for a doctoral students' success. Many authors have discussed the power differential between a student and supervisor, with some reporting exploitative, aggressive, and intrusive supervision as resulting problems. However, no publicly available study has specifically reported bullying as a by-product of the student-supervisor relationship. As victims of bullying are typically reluctant to voice their concerns face-to-face, data for this paper was sourced from student's experiential evidence located on internet blog sites. The eight blogs which form the data for this study were analysed for common themes. The six themes that emerged from the data were confusion, unrealistic work demands, criticism, anger and rage, inappropriate attention, and abuse of power. By exploring the doctoral students' experiences of supervisory bullying, this paper will discuss a previously unreported issue in the doctoral student-supervisor relationship, and provide guidance for institutions to stop the bullying before it even has a chance to begin.

Keywords: Bullying, doctoral student, power, supervisor

INTRODUCTION

Although difficult to categorise, the term 'bully' is commonly used to define a person "who is habitually cruel or overbearing, especially to smaller or weaker people" or who "force[s] one's way aggressively or by intimidation" (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, 2010). A bully may also be described as "a person who uses strength or power to coerce others by fear" (Garrett, 1997, p. 227). Moreover, a bully is a person who "persistently provokes, pressures, frightens, intimidates, or otherwise discomforts a person" (Brodsky, 1976, p. 2). As discussed by Rayner & Hoel (1997), the definition of bullying in some countries is influenced by legislation. For example, in the United Kingdom, "the victim must feel harassed, their work be affected, and

there must be a measure of frequency to the action" (Rayner & Hoel, 1997, p. 183-4).

Bullying behaviours in the workplace can generally be grouped into five categories: "(1) threat to professional status (e.g., public professional humiliation, accusation regarding lack of effort); (2) threat to personal standing (e.g., name-calling, insults, intimidation); (3) isolation (e.g., preventing access to opportunities, physical or social isolation, withholding of information); (4) overwork (e.g., undue pressure, impossible deadlines); and (5) destabilization (e.g., failure to give credit when due, meaningless tasks, removal of responsibility, repeated reminders of blunders, setting up to fail)" (Rayner & Hoel, 1997, p. 183).

In his report on bullying in a university setting, Lewis (2004) suggested that general

behaviours that describe bullying include giving persistent insults or criticism, ignoring the victim, and expecting the victim to undertake demeaning tasks and unrealistic work demands.

Workplace bullying generally "occurs between people who know each other and who have a past and a future" (Rayner & Hoel, 1997, p. 187). The bullying experience in any relationship can be devastating. For victims, "the need to relive, dwell upon, and anguish over their experiences presents a picture of people who remain connected with what has happened to them long after the bullying has ended" (Lewis, 2004, p. 295).

Gender, differences in social class, and occupational position may influence the likelihood of being bullied (Roscigno *et al.*, 2009). Furthermore, bullies often emerge in workplaces with a chaotic organisational culture (Roscigno *et al.*, 2009). Victims of bullying are generally less powerful than perpetrators, and organisations without effective constraints are likely to have employees who abuse other employees at will (Roscigno *et al.*, 2009).

Supervision is a demanding and chaotic pedagogy (Grant, 2003), with the power relationship between a student and supervisor reported as a major critical determinant of a graduate students' success and satisfaction with their graduate experience (Aguinis *et al.*, 1996; Bargar & Mayo-Chamberlain, 1983). Many authors have discussed the power differential and inequality in the student-supervisor relationship (e.g., Fine & Kurdek, 1993; Aguinis *et al.*, 1996; Manathunga, 2007). For example, in their study on assignment of authorship credit and order to student-faculty collaborations, Fine and Kurdek note that while "collaboration between two professionals can occur on an egalitarian basis, collaboration between faculty and their students is inherently unequal" (Fine & Kurdek, 1993, p. 1142). In her 2007 study, Manathunga discusses the operations of power inherent in student-supervisor relationships, whereby "supervisors facilitate students' development of their evolving identity as independent researchers, while, simultaneously, regulating students' disciplinary and other identities" (Manathunga, 2007, p. 219).

The power relationship between students and supervisors can have a profound impact on students' research productivity (Aguinis *et al.*, 1996, p. 289). A student's feelings of power or powerlessness can be "maximised or minimised depending on the power relationships set up by the [supervisor], or how the [supervisor] 'sets the tone' of the relationship" (Garrett, 1997, p. 228). Most students understand that during candidature, "they [are] expected to take on more responsibility for their own learning and develop a sense of ownership of the research project" (Johnston & Broda, 1996, p. 274) while at the same time, their supervisor is relying on the student's research outcomes and outputs as they are "important for the discipline and for the supervisor's own development within the discipline" (Johnston, 1999, p. 24). If not managed appropriately, the tension between a student and supervisor can impact a student's future career. Morris (2008) discusses more fully the impact of such tensions on a student's candidature.

In addition to power struggles, authors such as Goodyear *et al.* (1992) have also examined some of the ethical problems that can arise from this unequal relationship, including exploitative, incompetent, aggressive and intrusive supervision, as well as supervisor abandonment. However, no publicly available study has specifically reported bullying as a by-product of the student-supervisor relationship.

University academics are placed under enormous workload pressures and typically have competing demands for their time due to heavy undergraduate teaching loads, considerable administrative responsibilities, and continued pressure to conduct research (Deem & Brehony, 2000; Austin, 2003). These other pressures leave little time for supervision of research students (Deem & Brehony, 2000), with some supervisors transferring these workload pressures on to their doctoral students in the form of bullying. Moreover, as doctoral students are not employees, they are not protected from employment legislation that prohibits staff bullying at work (Anon, 1998). Doctoral students would, however, be afforded some

protection under harassment and discrimination policies and legislation. Under the current research culture existing at most institutions, only a brave doctoral student would take on his/her supervisor and potentially risk his/her future career.

This paper will provide the first known report of doctoral students' experiences of supervisory bullying, and comment on their journey for answers to questions such as "Is this bullying?" and "How can my institution stop it?".

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A qualitative methodological approach was employed for this study. Data was drawn from the personal experiences of doctoral students and bystanders who have written about their own or their friend's doctoral experiences on publicly available internet blog sites. The blogs were located on the web by searching *Google* using the key words 'doctoral bullying supervisor.' Only eight blogs describing supervisory bullying experiences of past and present students were located. These bloggers are the participants of this study and their experiential comments provided the data that was subsequently analysed.

The identity of the bloggers is unknown and any identifying features that could be used to locate the bloggers (such as country, discipline, and blog url) have been removed from the transcripts. The age of the blogs ranges from less than one year to four years old. Two of the blogs (Blogger 5 and Blogger 6) were responses to Blogger 4's original post.

The transcripts from the blogs were coded and subjected to thematic analysis, with the common themes identified using key words that appeared in the blogs. Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Behavioural and Social Sciences Ethical Review Committee at the author's university.

Before analysing the data, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. One such limitation is that most of the data sources used were from victim self-reports. While the prevalence of victim self-report data is consistent with other studies on bullying (e.g., Rayner & Hoel, 1997), it is important to note that this one-sided reporting may affect the results of this study. An additional limitation in this study is the use of data from bystanders: bloggers who wrote about other student's experiences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Six common themes were identified from the eight student experiences analysed in this study. These themes revealed some classic examples of bullying behaviour as described by Rayner & Hoel (1997) and Lewis (2004), such as overwork and threat to personal standing. The Lewis (2004) description of bullying was subsequently chosen as the framework for this study as it was the only one found that specifically discussed bullying in an academic context. Other studies on bullying focused on workplace and schoolyard bullying. The identified themes include confusion, unrealistic work demands, criticism, anger and rage, inappropriate attention, and use of power. Each theme is presented below, using excerpts from the original narrative passages.

Confusion

An identified theme raised by several students during their doctoral experience was a feeling of confusion. While not a bullying behaviour, the confusion expressed by these students during the course of their doctoral studies may actually underlie the subsequent bullying they experienced.

Blogger 1 expressed confusion about where to go for advice: "I am an international PhD student... I just wondered whether there was anyone who knows who I can go to for advice?".

Blogger 3, a new doctoral student, expressed confusion about the nature of the supervisory relationship:

> *I'm a first-year … grad student in a two-year Masters program and I'm having a lot of mixed feelings about my*

relationship with my advisor. Being new to grad life, it's been hard to figure out how much of what I'm experiencing is just 'paying my dues' and how much of it I should have real cause for concern. (Blogger 3)

After describing their experience, Blogger 3 continued to explain their sense of confusion with their supervisor and used a war analogy to highlight their situation:

I don't even know if this is truly a toxic situation or if my conception of graduate school was just completely off base. What I had expected to be a cultivating and enriching environment has lately felt more like a war zone. I think of my advisor as an enemy that I need to evade, not a friend or mentor. I don't even feel like a person around her. ... Should I just grow thicker skin, learn to cope, and stick it out with her? (Blogger 3)

The bullying experienced by Blogger 3 will be discussed in more detail below. However, their expressed confusion may have actually underpinned their bullying experience.

Unrealistic Work Demands

Several bloggers wrote about how their supervisors placed unrealistic work demands on them during their candidature. As a scientist, Blogger 1 raised the issue of working long hours and weekends, and Blogger 7 described how they left their PhD because their supervisor would not let them return home to get married.

My PhD supervisor is the head of the lab and he says that I must work weekends and long hours. But my roommates (who are not scientists) say that this is bullying and not right? Is it right that I should work long hours? I am writing this anonymously as I

don't want people from my lab to see it. (Blogger 1)

I'm afraid my experience as [an international] PhD student has not been particularly positive. ... My worst experience, and the one that caused me to leave the university, was a personal one. I got engaged in January 2002 and my second supervisor said I could return home to get married if I handed in a first draft of my thesis by April. But then, my third supervisor refused to give me a leave of absence. I was told the decision was 'in my best interests' ... I am now continuing my PhD [in another country]. (Blogger 7)

Criticism

Returning to Blogger 3's story, the student describes how their supervisor had a dictatorial and commanding attitude, talked condescendingly to them, and was critical of their mistakes:

The overall impression I've gotten is that my advisor sees her students as a means to an end. ... Though she was initially friendly, this soon gave way to a more commanding and dictatorial attitude. She's dismissive of my ideas, talks down to me condescendingly, brings me down in front of other people, slams her fists on her desk while raising her voice, and criticizes my slightest mistakes, all while minimally acknowledging solid work I have done. I walk out of meetings feeling like a punching bag. (Blogger 3)

Anger and Rage

In the excerpt provided above, Blogger 3 also described how their supervisor expressed anger towards them, by "slam[ing] her fists on the desk while raising her voice". The same supervisor also caused Blogger 3 to feel angry

and frustrated: "There's virtually no positive reinforcement from her and I've ended up feeling this bizarre mix of resentment, frustration, anger, and uncertainty".

Blogger 2 described a frightful situation where a supervisor would "throw fits of temper" at her students and staff. Furthermore, Blogger 2 endured this behaviour for two and a half years:

> *I have had the PhD from hell…I began my PhD in one department. After working for 1 1/2 years with one supervisor, my supervisor's funding for the project was cut. … I then started my PhD over again in a new department with a new supervisor. Working with the new supervisor was worse than anything I could ever imagine. She was a horrific bully who would throw fits of temper at all her staff and students. She would threaten to 'crack your head against a wall'. She would swear and throw fits of rage and I spent 2 1/2 years working in a complete state of terror. There were several complaints filed against her with the university and in fact, she had been investigated for bullying on a previous occasion but the university didn't do a thing. …. brushed everything aside. After working with this PhD supervisor for 2 1/2 years I finally couldn't take it anymore so I walked out. When I left she tried to claim legal entitlement to my data and I had to fight to get the data returned to me. She confiscated the first year of my work (which is to be published in another person's name). I am now working with a third PhD supervisor.* (Blogger 2)

Inappropriate Attention

Blogger 4 outlined a disturbing situation where her supervisor appeared to be interested in her personally rather than professionally. She described several incidents where she received

inappropriate attention from her supervisor and in her blog, seems to be asking others to suggest a way out:

> *I am a research student in my second year of a PhD bursary. I've become increasingly anxious about my supervisor, a professor in the department in which I am primarily based.…*
>
> *I know the relationship with a doctoral supervisor can be intense, challenging and unequal, but things are getting bizarre. He sits too close to me during our meetings. On the most recent occasion, I simply stood up and moved my chair back. He made a joke about it and then immediately encroached on my space again, saying: 'Goodness, I'm not contagious!'*
>
> *He keeps telling me that I'm 'going to do great things' and says 'stick with me, I'll help you all I can but you have to play ball'. It's not what he says but the way he says it. I've also been given some lecturing and project development work, thanks to him. He has started phoning me at home about minor issues to do with the work. He now wants to meet me for a meal on Valentine's Day at a very expensive restaurant as 'a treat for all your good work.' … There are few guidelines on conduct in this area, which seem to me intentionally underdeveloped. I think it's pointless going to the union. … I need a way out.* (Blogger 4)

In response to Blogger 4's dilemma, Blogger 5 describes another incident where their friend was paid inappropriate attention from her supervisor:

> *A friend of mine had a similar experience. However, when she stood up for herself and rejected her*

supervisor's advances, he made her life hell. The end result, she failed her PhD. She felt she couldn't complain as the Old Boys' Network always closes rank. (Blogger 5)

Abuse of Power

The final theme raised in the blogs was abuse of power. Bloggers discussed several forms of power abuse including abuse of physical, emotional, and academic power. Bloggers 2 and 3 described the physical power wielded by their supervisors during exchanges. Blogger 2's supervisor also wielded her academic power by trying to claim legal entitlement to Blogger 2's data after they left the institution. In Blogger 4's case, her supervisor abused his emotional and academic power by telling her she will achieve greatness as long as she plays his game.

While not their own experience, Blogger 8 described another student's experience of being bullied:

One girl I worked with was badly bullied by her supervisor. The head of department knew he was a bully (especially towards women) but wouldn't let her arrange a new supervisor - she had to try and 'resolve' her problem by basically putting up with his unhelpful and derogatory comments. (Blogger 8)

Blogger 6 also raised the issue of power, both in terms of the abuse of power in a student-supervisor relationship and the potential power that the bullied student has to "embarrass the university":

The huge potential for abuse in the starkly asymmetrical relationship between PhD student and supervisor is something I have witnessed first-hand as a support member of staff working with a group who were either subjected to harassment (which sounds,

even in terms of the vocabulary used, very similar) or bullying depending on their gender from a supervisor. They all suffered in silence choosing to 'manage' the situation and endure behaviours which in the rest of the workplace and outside academia would have been stamped on years back. Realise your power which is the power to embarrass the university ... [by using] the media age. (Blogger 6)

The findings above highlight an array of unsavoury interactions experienced by doctoral students or the blogger's friends as described on internet blog sites. Blogger 1 posed the question "is this [behaviour] bullying?". As described above, Rayner & Hoel (1997) and Lewis (2004) identified a range of behaviours that constitute bullying. With reference to these descriptors, particularly those noted by Lewis (2004) in a university setting, I therefore argue that the experience of all bloggers described in this study above constitutes bullying behaviour by their supervisors.

The bullying cases described by the bloggers appear not to be isolated, and I'm sure many of us are aware of similar incidents. Indeed, following presentation of this paper at the 2nd International Doctoral Education Research Network Conference, April 2010, in Malaysia, and subsequent articles that featured in the Australian print media (Healy, 2010a, b), six Australian doctoral students informed me that they had experienced similar supervisory bullying behaviours to those reported here for the unidentified bloggers.

Given that most bullying episodes can be characterised "as entailing high levels of inequality and powerlessness" (Roscigno *et al*., 2009, p. 1580), it is not surprising that doctoral students can experience bullying in their supervisory relationship. Furthermore, the bullying experience of these students has clearly impacted on their lives, as they dwell on and relive their experiences through their internet stories.

Bloggers 2 and 3 experienced classic cases of workplace bullying when their supervisors yelled at them in front of others to publicly humiliate them. "The supervisory behaviour evidenced here is callous, disrespectful, and undermines the employee's [or student's] dignity" (Roscigno *et al.*, 2009, p. 1571). Furthermore, the supervisors appeared to have acted aggressively towards the student to control the relationship (Dupré & Barling, 2006).

Bullying behaviours may also entail sexually-related content, such as those behaviours described by Bloggers 4 and 5. "The primary motivation [for such behaviour] appears to [be] to humiliate the worker [or student], with the sexual content serving as a gratuitous carrier for the abuse" (Roscigno *et al.*, 2009, p. 1572). In the case of the student-supervisor interaction, this behaviour can also be seen as an abuse of the supervisor's power in the relationship.

Although not a bullying behaviour, the confusion expressed by several bloggers may actually underpin their bullying experience. Some of the students were unsure what was acceptable practice in their institution or even where to access information about acceptable practices. New students would be well advised to learn about acceptable institutional practices either from their institution's website or from their local Faculty postgraduate coordinator. Being aware of their institution's expectations will prepare them for future discussion with their supervisor.

CONCLUSIONS

In light of this study's findings, it is important to ask what can an institution do to stop bullying? The bloggers who experienced bullying behaviours thought action against their supervisor was fruitless. Indeed, situations such as those described by Bloggers 5 and 8 only reinforce the notion that lodging a complaint can be futile. It's no wonder that Blogger 1 was worried about being identified. There are guidelines on managing bullying or harassment behaviours at most institutions, such as the "Discrimination and Harassment" policy at my university (The University of Queensland, 2010). However, policies such as these are "merely cosmetic unless enforced impartially against the aberrant supervisor" (Anon, 1998, p. 407).

Roscigno *et al.* (2009) called for "organisational responses to bullying to move beyond a Band-aid approach in which each incident is handled individually…. Indeed, [their] results suggest concrete avenues for organisations to take to prevent [emphasis in original] bullying rather than just seeking redress when it occurs" (Roscigno *et al.*, 2009, p. 1581). If organisations don't adequately manage bullying complaints in a more effective manner, then the exercise could become costly with a possible increase in litigation from discontented students (Anon, 1998). Moreover, the power that disgruntled students like Blogger 6 have, to embarrass the university, can further exacerbate the situation. Institutions need to do more to ameliorate this problem and stop or reduce supervisory bullying "rather than attempting to mitigate its effects only *after* [emphasis in original] someone has been victimized" (Roscigno *et al.*, 2009, p. 1581).

Legislation differs from country to country, but typically includes Workplace Health and Safety Acts (e.g., Australia), Harassment Acts (e.g., New Zealand), and Public Order and Nuisance Acts (e.g., Singapore). Each Act outlines the obligations for citizens in that country, and clearly lists the penalties that could be imposed for breaching these obligations. As these Acts typically underpin institutional policies and guidelines, discussion on the relevant Acts and institutional policies, acceptable behaviours, and sources for further information, could be incorporated into existing institutional programs like new staff and student inductions, or supervisor training sessions.

Other studies on workplace aggression have commented "the role of perceived organizational sanctions is important for the prevention of workplace aggression" (Dupré & Barling, 2006, p. 22). As such, it would be in an institutions best interest to ensure that both its staff and student members are aware of the existence and

use of such policies (Dupré & Barling, 2006). Incorporation of existing policies and procedures, legislation, and acceptable behaviours into staff and student training sessions, would encourage appropriate behaviour and reinforce the message that bullying is unacceptable. Furthermore, discussion of policies and acceptable behaviours would set a precedent for positive collaborative relationships, with knowledge of such policies having the potential to reduce negative student and supervisor experiences downstream and stop the bullying before it even has a chance to begin.

Although this study has not quantified the prevalence of bullying in the student-supervisor relationship, it is disturbing to think that these incidents even occurred and throws in to question, how many cases of bullying actually go unreported. In addition, it is also important to note that the bullying of supervisors by students, which, while not the subject of this study, is an equally alarming thought. Further research into the occurrences of bullying by both students and supervisors would enable the research community to better appreciate the prevalence of bullying in the student-supervisor relationship. Additionally, future research should involve, where possible, in-depth interviews with both victims and bullies to address the limitation of using self-report data as done in the present study.

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