Editorial

Duncan Lewis, Tim Bentley & Stephen T. T. Teo

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Theme: Public sector reforms and workplace ill-treatment

Editorial

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Guest editors

Workplace ill-treatment has been conceptualized by researchers using various labels including; 'bullying' (Einarsen *et al.*, 2011); 'harassment' (Matthiesen, 2006); 'mistreatment' (Lim and Cortina, 2008); 'violence' (Jones *et al.*, 2011); and 'discrimination' (Lewis and Gunn, 2007) among others. Fevre *et al.* (2012) argue that labels such as bullying often conceal the broader experiences of ill-treatment taking place in organizations, particularly in public sector workplaces where there is a stubborn pattern of constancy (Evesson *et al.*, 2015). The aim of this *Public Money & Management* theme is to empirically explore, using international contributions, the antecedents and consequences of ill-treatment in public sector workplaces. In doing so, we are filling an important gap in the knowledge and understanding of public sector workplace ill-treatment.

Some of the earliest research on bullying by Swedish pioneer Heinz Leymann reported high numbers of public sector workers from health, social services and educational occupations reporting post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms as a result of their workplace experiences (Leymann and Gustafsson, 1996). Similar findings have been reported globally in a range of public sector occupations, such as medical work (Quine, 1999; Burnes and Pope, 2007; Bentley *et al.*, 2009), education (Fox and Stallworth, 2005; Lewis *et al.*, 2009) and public administration (Fevre *et al.*, 2012). Violence also features strongly in numerous studies, with health and social work and public administration faring particularly badly as a result of violent encounters with members of the public (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2007; Jones *et al.*, 2011). Leadership and management figure as central components in the ill-treatment experiences of public sector workers, either because they are the most cited cause of problems encountered by employees (Fevre *et al.*, 2012), or because they fail to tackle, or indeed recognize, negative behaviours within their own departments (Bentley *et al.*, 2009). Similarly, when violent encounters take place with members of the public or between co-workers, management interventions are often found wanting (Fevre *et al.*, 2012).

Against this backdrop of troubled public sector workplaces, few researchers have sought to understand why the public sector should be so problematic for ill-treatment. While the work environment of excessive job demands, poor autonomy and lack of job control has long been shown as central to understanding concepts such as bullying (Baillien *et al.*, 2011; Lewis *et al.*, 2017), other descriptions such as ineffective leadership (Einarsen *et al.*, 2007) and organizational change (Salin and Hoel, 2011) have also been cited as contributory components. It is therefore not surprising that new public management (NPM) should be cited as a potential contributor to why public sector work should be so troubled, possibly because concepts of 'dignity, justice [and] quality of life' are elusive in NPM environments (Diefenbach, 2009, p. 900). The drive to establish leadership and management as pre-eminent in NPM has been argued to create clashes between managerial competencies and professional ones, particularly in health and social care (Noordegraaf and Van Der Meulen, 2008). It is these very tensions that Fevre *et al.* (2012) categorize as indicative of 'troubled workplaces' where the meanings and understandings people attach to their working lives are fractured by the agendas of NPM and public value (Moore and Bennington, 2011) among others. Policy schemas from government rooted in ideologies of 'value for money', particularly in the current taxonomies surrounding austerity schemata, draw into question the very individual contributions made by employees working in the public sector. As Fevre *et al.* (2012, pp. 202–203) noted:

> …*people might be particularly affected by treatment which seemed to demonstrate that their work was not valued, and their employer felt no reciprocal commitment.*

It is, perhaps, this aspect that might tell us so

much more about why ill-treatment is felt so strongly in the public sector. The constant change and handling more activity for less resource results in a moral evaluation by employees of no longer being prepared to 'go the extra mile' because of the devaluing of the work they do by those seeking efficiencies and new ways of working that add value to those in control of the public purse.

This aspect features strongly in the first paper in this theme where Hazel Mawdsley and Duncan Lewis outline how people with long-term health conditions (LTHC) and disabilities can be targeted for ill-treatment. Drawing upon interviews and focus groups of public sector trade union members and officers, Mawdsley and Lewis discuss how a social model of disability dominates the lives of some of the disabled and chronically sick public sector workers, principally through NPM practices and working environments where managers fail to address the needs of those who are recognized in law as having legal rights to adjusted work.

Australian policing is the context for our second paper, where Ben Farr-Wharton, Kate Shacklock, Yvonne Brunetto, Stephen Teo and Rod Farr-Wharton set the scene by noting that policing is an environment characterized, post-NPM, by increased accountability, heightened corporate governance and increased monitoring/control. Management reforms, funding cuts and hierarchical command structures, the authors argue, underlie the experience of workplace bullying in this sector. The paper examines the relationships among police officers and their supervisors and managers through the lens of social exchange theory (SET) and perceived organizational support. The evidence of this study is that management practices are key to reducing bullying risk in policing, with both quantitative and qualitative data indicating a poor SET environment, with managers failing to provide necessary resources leaving officers with unmanageable workloads and inadequate support.

Next, Geoff Plimmer, Sarah Proctor-Thomson, Noelle Donnelly and Dalice Sim remind us that New Zealand was an early and enthusiastic adopter of NPM, and therefore makes for an interesting case of public sector work. The authors consider the relationship between a broad range of individual and organizational factors and mistreatment among a large sample of female state service workers in New Zealand. Their study, which sought to identify both risk and protective factors for mistreatment, provides new evidence of how the risk of bullying and discrimination is increased where individual and organizational characteristics that are associated with mistreatment are combined. Most importantly, the findings of this study speak to the role of wider workplace dynamics in the aetiology of mistreatment at work (also see Fevre *et al.*, 2012), while challenging more narrow explanations that emphasise the role of interpersonal factors.

Psychosocial risks are highly prevalent in the nursing profession internationally, and nurses are considered highly vulnerable to workplace bullying. Our next two papers (by Elisabetta Trinchero, Ben Farr-Wharton and Elio Borgonovi; and by Kate Blackwood, Tim Bentley, Bevan Catley and Margot Edwards) focus on ill-treatment in this sector, drawing on different theoretical perspectives, but both highlighting the key influence of organizational factors. The papers report on Italian and New Zealand contexts, the first examining, quantitatively, the link between nurse relationships with management and perceptions of harassment, while the second explores, qualitatively, how the nursing work environment influences intervention to prevent bullying in the New Zealand sector. Trinchero and colleagues draw on social exchange theory (SET) to examine bullying in Italian nursing, finding that the relationship that a nurse has with their supervisor is a key element in the

perception of ill-treatment in the form of psychological harassment. Drawing on the work environment hypothesis, Blackwood *et al.* examine the role organizational factors, in particular, play in influencing the management of workplace bullying experiences in the New Zealand health sector. Through exploring intervention agents' responses to a range of bullying scenarios, the study looks across the work system in understanding the dynamics of intervention, and contributes to our understanding about best practice for the prevention of bullying in a highly challenging environment.

Helge Hoel, Duncan Lewis and Anna Einarsdottir, in their debate article, outline the extent and nature of bullying and harassment among a representative sample of lesbians, gay men and bisexual (LGB) employees in the UK. As was predicted based on smaller-scale earlier studies in the UK and elsewhere, LGBs were found to be bullied and discriminated against to a far greater extent and more frequently than heterosexual employees. The authors discuss these findings in relation to the public sector work environment. Implications for prevention include training and development for public sector managers and staff.

Where does robust performance management cross over into bullying and how do we know what is 'reasonable management action' in the context of a performance culture such as found in the public sector? These are some of the questions grappled with by Maryam Omari and Megan Paull. This debate article considers the impact of change towards use of performance management and the need to get 'more from less' in the public sector, and how these changes are at odds with the traditional stable nature of the sector.

Change is also the central theme of our last contribution to this special issue on public sector reforms and workplace ill-treatment. Within the context of NPM reforms in the health services industry, our final article by John Rodwell presents and outlines an holistic model of the drivers of bullying in the sector. The model, which represents a systems view of bullying including interactions between the individual worker, work design, occupation and contextual factors, is derived from a review of recent empirical studies. The unique contribution of Rodwell's article is the broad scope of analysis applied to the question of how public sector reforms impact across the different layers of the health services industry work system and, in particular, how the line of influence runs from outside in. Contextual

factors, therefore, and those associated with the organization are likely to influence the occurrence of bullying in the workplace. Unfortunately, Rodwell notes that it is at these outer layers of the work system that intervention is hardest to implement, meaning interventions must begin at the inner layers and work outward.

In empirically exploring the antecedents and consequences of ill-treatment in public sector workplaces across international contexts, the contributions to this *PMM* theme remind us of the challenges and complexities of public sector reform, and the impacts of NPM in particular. What is clear from these contributions is that an understanding of the cultural, organizational and other contextual factors impacting workplace behaviour is crucial towards progress in responding to ill-treatment in the public sector, meaning narrow, 'blame the worker', approaches to prevention will not be effective in the long run.

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Duncan Lewis is Professor of Management in the Graduate School of Management, Plymouth University, UK.

Tim Bentley is Professor of Work and Organization in the School of Management, Massey University, New Zealand.

Stephen T. T. Teo is Professor of Work and Performance, Edith Cowan University, Australia.

Debate: Bullying and harassment of lesbians, gay men and bisexual employees: findings from a representative British national study

Helge Hoel, Duncan Lewis and Anna Einarsdottir

Our knowledge about bullying and discrimination in the workplace has grown exponentially over the last decade (Nielsen and Einarsen, 2010). It has been established beyond doubt that a substantial proportion of the working population, varying between 4–20% between studies, is exposed to bullying (for example Zapf *et al.*, 2011), that is, repeated exposure to negative acts, whether work or person-related against which targets finds it hard to defend themselves (Einarsen *et al.*, 2011). Bullying had been found to be detrimental to health, wellbeing and job-satisfaction (Nielsen and Einarsen, 2010), with consequences likely to show up on organizations' balance sheets in respect of, *inter alia*, increased absenteeism and turnover rates, and in reduced productivity (Hoel *et al.*, 2011).

With reference to evidence from European studies, it has frequently been claimed that the risk of bullying, particularly for the more intensive and severe incidents experienced often involving social exclusion and ostracism (Nielsen *et al.*, 2015), is higher in the public sector than the private sector, emphasising the high levels of bullying found for those working in public administration, and in the health and social sectors and education (Zapf *et al.*, 2011; Fevre *et al.*, 2012). Still, despite growing knowledge about workplace bullying and its effects in general, relatively little is known about the influence of sexual orientation and the experiences of lesbians, gay men and