Making Sense of 'Bullying' Behaviour:
Individual Perspectives on Critical Incidents

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SUMMARY

Despite the recent growth of research on workplace bullying researchers have had little opportunity to study how individuals come to be labeled as bullies. While bullying is sometimes described in terms of individuals' perceptions, researchers lack a framework for working through the subjectivities on both sides of the labelling process. Using the lens of sensemaking (Weick 1995), this paper considers stories of bullying related by participants in public service organisations in Australia, where data was collected from the alleged perpetrators as well as from 'victims', bystanders and those charged with managing complaints of bullying. Our goal is to raise alternative perspectives for interpreting bullying scenarios and to commence a process of highlighting some different options for managers and researchers seeking to understand actions labelled as bullying. Sensemaking theory offers quite a different and detailed account of the social construction processes that might go into the use of such a label.

Keywords: Workplace bullying, sensemaking, shared understanding

INTRODUCTION

When an individual claims to have been 'bullied', how do researchers or managers judge their claim? While research journals and the media increasingly identify workplace bullying as a serious organisational problem, much of the discussion seems to assume bullying is simple to identify, and that employees' claims of bullying are generally to be accepted. For example, surveys on the extent, causes or consequences of bullying often assume respondents use the same criteria in applying what is essentially a judgemental (and pejorative) term.

Bullying is a complex phenomenon, and representations of it as the act of an aggressor against a victim are simplistic. For example, some researchers have suggested workers feeling bullied might consider how their own behaviour contributes to this, or why they interpret particular events as bullying (e.g. Lewis 2002). There is also evidence of cyclical 'bullying' in dyadic relationships, where the two parties develop a top-dog – under-dog relationship that sustains the self-image of both (Standen & Omari 2008). In other situations, bullies and victims swap positions over time: so-called reciprocal bullying (e.g. Lee & Brotheridge 2006). Individuals accused of bullying may dispute not only the facts but their interpretation, for example reassigning responsibility to the victim (as provocateur) or to work pressures, excessive managerial pressure, situations (e.g. crises), cultural values or organisational policy (e.g. scrutiny disguised as accountability).

Another example of the complexities behind this concept is that individuals have different thresholds, depending on their ability to defend themselves amongst other factors: behaviour one person can tolerate (e.g. public criticism) can be seen as bullying by another (Standen & Omari, 2007).

Such complexities highlight the subjective nature of bullying and the need to understand how individuals use the word. There appears to be very little research on this. This paper looks at this as an example of 'sensemaking' (Weick 1969), the process by which people extract cues and form meanings in accord with their self-image and social context. Weick's studies show sensemaking to be a form of rationalisation, "the retrospective development of plausible images" (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld 2005, p409) constructed to explain one's and others' behaviour. He focuses on sensemaking as a social activity in which meanings are formed through language and communication. In essence "situations ... are talked into existence" (Weick et al 2005, p409).

When looked at this way, the process of claiming one has been bullied is full of opportunity for subjectivity. This paper explores implications of sensemaking theory for researchers and managers interested in how claims of bullying arise. From research on bullying in the Australian public sector, we draw examples of such claims and propose possible explanations or raise questions that illustrate the complexities of the social act of using the labels "bully" or "victim".

Despite the recent growth of research on workplace bullying and related terms (e.g. harassment, victimisation, petty tyranny, mobbing) researchers have had little opportunity to study bullies themselves, and lack frameworks for working through the subjectivities on both sides of the labelling process, those of the victim and the alleged bully. While bullying research seems to influence discussions about the types of behaviour considered appropriate in the workplace, and policies and practices for their management, misleading conclusions may be drawn if claims of bullying are taken at face value.

There is no widely-accepted definition of bullying, although context, frequency, type of behaviour and impact on victims have all been used as the foci of attempts to define it. Here we highlight the individual interpretation of behaviour in keeping with an interpretivist or social constructionist view of the world (Williams, 2002). Beyond this we consider 'bullying' to imply behaviour that is unwelcome and distressing to the recipient, and judged socially inappropriate in the context.

It is worth noting that some researchers define bullying as a perception rather than an objectively demonstrable act (e.g. Hoel & Cooper, 2001). This makes the study of perceptual and labelling processes critical, although there appear to be few attempts at this.

STUDY OVERVIEW

The study involved participants from eleven Australian Public Sector agencies in Western Australia. Four agencies volunteered to participate in all four stages of the study, and individuals from a range of other agencies volunteered for individual stages of the study. A triangulated research design was used to improve the reliability and validity of the data. Initially three focus groups with twenty-eight participants from four agencies provided information on the nature of behaviour considered to be bullying, including what participants considered to be its causes and consequences. These groups provided a frame of reference for the other parts of the study.

Subsequently a survey examined the climate and culture of participating organisations and sought data on the rates and nature of events participants viewed as bullying. The response rate of around 37% provided 219 usable surveys. The last few pages of the survey sought free-response data where respondents were asked to recount stories of bullying, as either victim, bystander or alleged perpetrator. A total of fifty-four respondents volunteered stories, some more than one. The level of detail in these ranged from very brief to extremely detailed, spanning many pages.

The third stage involved semi-structured interviews with Human Resource Managers and policy-makers in some of the organisations. These provided greater understanding of the work environment relevant to other aspects of the study.

Finally, individuals who had been formally or informally accused of bullying were invited on the survey form to provide their perspectives in unstructured interviews. Ten alleged perpetrators

responded. Data was collected in unstructured interviews where interviewees were simply asked to recount their story. This appears to be the first instance in the bullying literature of data collection from alleged 'perpetrators'. The findings highlighted the well-known adage that 'there are two sides to every story'.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION AND SENSEMAKING

Berger and Luckmann (1966, p33) argue in their seminal work that "everyday life presents itself as a reality interpreted by men and subjectively meaningful to them as a coherent world". Central to their perspective is that our experience of the world – our 'reality' - is constructed through a process of communication and creation of shared understandings that underpin the language by which we talk to each other. As relationships and contexts change our understandings are shaped and reshaped to accommodate new information, creating new 'realities'.

Sensemaking theory offers an explicit account of aspects of this transient social construction process. Studies of sensemaking cover a diverse range of sources and disciplines, having developed over a number of years in a complex and sometimes contested evolution (Weick 1995; Weick et al 2005). Below, we consider some its major tenets and their general implications for the attribution of labels such as 'bully' and 'victim'.

Sensemaking has both tacit and explicit components. Explicit sensemaking begins when the world is seen to be different from expectations; the normal flow of events is interrupted. Bullying claims are likely to arise from just such interruptions, for example when a person perceives another acting more aggressively or focusing more on them than normal. The 'subject' would then attempt to create a story from myriad clues, often nuances - "the subtle, the small, the relational, the oral, the particular, and the momentary" (Weick et al 2005 p410) as much as conspicuous, general or sustained clues. From this perspective, individuals have many opportunities to misread the motivations and agency of others.

It is also important to see sensemaking as fluid and ongoing. Perceptions of bullying may be very much influenced by momentary perceptions, individual cues extracted from the ongoing flux of sensory experience. A person notices a slight shift in vocal tone, or change in facial expression, brackets it off for further consideration, and makes sense of this unexpected cue by inferring, for example, "he (the boss) doesn't like me today". Again, the tentative nature of social perception is highlighted along with the possibilities of misattribution. Is the subject here unusually sensitive, or has the object (the other) changed? Are these cues interpreted accurately? What processes does the subject use for drawing inferences – does he or she have good interpersonal perception skills? Are they sufficiently self-aware as to attribute their emotional reaction to the boss' scowl as a consequence of the fight they had with their spouse last night, or sufficiently empathic to consider the boss's difficult board meeting this morning?

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In this "incipient state of sensemaking" (Weick et al 2005 p411) the sensemaker considers the accumulation of things which have been noticed and bracketed, drawing on a range of conscious and subconscious resources, in labeling and categorizing to create order and work out "what's going on here?" These resources include past experience, meanings shared with others and with society, including those acquired by training, education and learning. In attributing another as a bully, a person is attempting to connect noticed cues with previous situations in which actors have been labeled the same way. They may therefore be heavily influenced by what others have previously considered bullying, whether observed directly or learned from stories of events elsewhere, including fictional events.

Further, people's cognitive categories contain both central prototypical cases and peripheral cases having more equivocal meaning (Tsoukas & Chia 2002). Therefore the way in which a person has organised previous encounters with behaviour labelled as "bullying" by others is crucial in understanding their subjectivity. It is likely such categorisations vary according to experience, age, personality and many other factors.

As a fundamentally retrospective process, sensemaking is also reliant on memory. An attribution of "bully" requires comparing present cues with past ones; "has he been like this a lot?" Although single events can be considered bullying, it is likely previous behaviours are analysed for congruence and the label is more likely to be used if the present behaviour is not its first incidence. Again, subjectivity would arise from differences in individuals' memory processes and capabilities.

Sensemaking in Weick's view thus involves connecting abstract and impersonal categories such as 'bully' with "concrete, idiosyncratic, and personal" cues (Weick et al 2005 p412), an intensely subjective process. Hunches are formed and tested, other possibilities excluded, and understanding unfolds through successive approximations. A person's motivation for, and skills in, testing these approximations will influence the outcome.

Weick (1995) considers sensemaking to occur on four levels, representing different social influences: intrasubjective (individual), intersubjective (between individuals), generic subjective (across the group) and extrasubjective (symbolic, institutionalised). In considering whether to label an incident 'bullying', a person might be influenced by what others think of it or similar incidents, by group or organisational norms for work behaviour, and by the nature and significance of the concept to institutions including the organisation, unions, professional organisations, courts and enforcement agencies, cultural groups and society generally.

A final important aspect of sensemaking involves determining "what action is needed?" Weick's phrase "how can I know what I think until I see what I say?" illustrates the interconnectedness of talk and action. In the case of problem solving this might be phrased "how do I know what I think until I see what I do?" Rather than a step-by-step process of action and talk, action is an integral part of sensemaking. People learn by doing, relying on trusted frameworks for labelling and simultaneously testing new ones, in cycles of action and talk. Thus a person's concept of bullying is built up over time, tested in conversations and other communications, and intertwined

with the tasks relevant to the moment. These features also show how perception of bullying is very subjective.

MAKING SENSE OF BULLYING STORIES

Below we consider stories of bullying related by study participants using the lens of sensemaking. Our goal is not to question the validity of the label bully in these specific events but to raise alternative perspectives for interpreting such scenarios.

Story 1: Sabotage

In this story, an individual who was initially a good colleague was considered to have resorted to covert bullying tactics when his power base was threatened.

> *I was a new member of a budget team   My task was to 'learn' the tasks of a [senior officer] who produced the Department's portfolio budget statements (PBS) as the [senior officer] was going to go on 'sick leave' during the time the PBS was to be produced. The [senior officer] gave me no encouragement, belittled me, left no working procedures and 'sabotaged' the budget spreadsheet so we would make a mistake in the PBS (fortunately we found this and the mistake did not occur). I believe he did not want anyone else to know how to do the PBS as he had done it for many years and if I was to learn it and succeed his importance would be diminished ... I and the team did achieve the results without him ... his bulliness (sic) continued when he returned from leave. He would not include me in discussions with Finance or the CFO [Chief Financial Officer], and would criticise openly and actively go out of this way not to help.*

This respondent is attempting to make sense of a senior officer's behaviour, and suggests that his (the respondent's) work was deliberately sabotaged. A sensemaking perspective suggests many questions that might bear upon alternative explanations. What was noticed in concluding the spreadsheet was 'sabotaged', and what lead to the attribution that it was deliberate rather than incompetence or inattention? What aspects of the alleged bully's behavior were noticed in future events? What was the respondent's reaction to the initial event; did he or she attempt to understand the spreadsheet problem, or to resolve the problem? Did the respondent facilitate these behaviours, deliberately or subconsciously, or prolong the dispute? Are there alternative explanations for exclusion from discussions with the CFO? Does the respondent have good skills of social perception? How was he or she influenced by perceptions of what constitutes bullying, and how the label can be used, from other individuals, groups or institutional statements?

These questions are not raised as tests of the respondent's integrity: there could be a host of other explanations involving "office politics", "personality clashes" or "ulterior motivations" (e.g. stress leave, compensation) that do not involve sensemaking. The problem highlighted here is that such alternatives are easily suggested, while the possible consequences of subjectivity in perception processes are less likely to be raised by investigators. Ultimately, even if answers to these and other questions could be found, appreciation of how subjectivity operates might

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produce a conclusion beyond the simplistic notion that bullying did or did not occur. Sensemaking is a complex process.

Story 2: Conflicting Goals

Here an HR Manager was accused of bullying while reintegrating an injured employee back to work after a period of recuperation. While the manager justified his actions in terms of the organisation's need to maintain productivity and morale, another side of the story was to some extent acknowledged:

> *We had one case recently where one person was injured and they were off work for 14 weeks and I know that they were very agitated about the fact that they had to come back to work. We were agitated about the fact that they weren't at work, that we were paying them while they were staying at home. Trying to deal with the conflict that exists between an employee basically wanting to live their life and us wanting the employee to fulfil their contract. "We pay you to do what we want you to do; we don't pay you to stay at home with your family". "Well why not?" There really is a tension and so in order to deal with that tension, which exists all the time, there is going to be some conflicts. But at least we could minimise the power imbalances that some of that stuff brings up. We look at it and we say, from an HR perspective, "well I'm in a position of power and I'm really peeved that this person isn't doing exactly what I want them to be doing". And at this stage they are saying, "how peeved am I that these bastards are forcing me to jump through these flame filled hoops when I'm a decent, honest, hardworking person". So there's the potential then to take away from their enthusiasm and their motivation, so even if you don't see it directly it's got an organisation impact that goes beyond.*

This respondent notes the power imbalance between employee and organisation. While he or she appears to have a broader sensemaking approach than the previous one, this story highlights the difference between the two party's constructions of reality and the difficulty of resolving it. As an HR manager, he judges the accusation of bullying within the extrasubjective frame of the organisations' values as learned through formal and informal communications.

Questions to be asked include how much the manager is influenced by social perception norms set in this extrasubjective frame, how extensively he or she has tried to empathise with the problem staff member, and what aspects of his communications and manner were noticed by the staff member accusing him of bullying. How elaborate were each party's bracketing and labelling processes? What frames did the staff member bring to his or her attribution?

Again, the focus of such questions would be on inquiring into the social perception processes of each party, and how they are framed by organisational and other social sensemaking influences, rather than attempting to apportion blame.

Story 3: Spoken Over

Groups are important influences in sensemaking. In this story, a newcomer was ignored by a powerful group member:

Whilst acting in an [executive] capacity I attended a regular Executive meeting. I was quite nervous and apprehensive and anxious to create a good impression. Anyway, … I sat, observed and listened patiently and waited for the opportunity to join in with the discussion to maybe suggest that a) I was comfortable being in the environment, and b) I had something worthwhile to say. The opportunity came and I started to comment about a specific issue, (my heart racing at this point) only to get spoken over by an experienced [executive] and I was left sitting open-mouthed feeling embarrassed and angry – angry that I had been spoken over and (probably) more angry that not one of the other executives in the room acknowledged the incident and afforded me the opportunity to say what I wanted to. In a way, although it was only one person that was responsible for the incident I felt that the other executives in the room were guilty by association because not one of them seemed prepared to come to my rescue or even to acknowledge the incident.

Here the respondent rationalises the act of being spoken over as a consequence of being a new or temporary member of the executive, and perceives others in the group contributing to the bullying through inaction. We may question their noticing and bracketing during the meeting: were they inexperienced in executive group norms, lacking socialisation to the meaning of such behaviours amongst this group? Were they overly sensitive by virtue of personality or social perception skills? Did the others notice the respondent's discomfort? Was the respondent's anxiety noticed by other members, and did his or her insecurity influence their attributions? Did the respondent inquire into the 'overriding' executive's sensemaking, internally or verbally?

Other questions can be asked of the group members. Coyne et al (2004 p314) suggests that more cohesive teams result in higher levels of victimisation. What group norms influenced their perceptions of the respondent generally? Did they perceive the interruption as bullying, and how do their norms influence such attributions?

Story 4: I Am Not a Victim

While researchers and public commentators may join with calling targets of bullying 'victim', this term too has subjectivities. For example, some studies show individuals are often reported to be both bullies and victims (Ireland & Snowden 2002; Jennifer et al. 2003). This is consistent with the reciprocal bullying phenomenon noted earlier, but also with the perspective examined here, that one or both parties are highly subjective in their use of such terms and therefore 'not speaking the same language'. In our study, one respondent did not see him or herself as a victim, despite reporting behaviour that others could see as bullying:

When this man makes the comments I feel really annoyed and irritated – a weaker person could easily crumble, but his style doesn't affect me, which seems to encourage him to continue even more. He always tries to catch me out on things or make me look stupid but it doesn't really work because I know what I'm doing and I clearly am not stupid.

Individuals have different thresholds or definitions behind terms like 'bully' and 'victim'. These may be stable in the long-term, but the sensemaking perspective also highlights the possibility

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that small (or large) cues extracted from the flow of sensory data through bracketing and meaning-making may tip a judgement one way or another, leading the individual down a different path of interpretation. Researchers would benefit from finding new ways to inquire into this process than standard questionnaires or interview procedures.

Story 5: Difficult Memories

We have raised questions about the role of subjectivity in 'victim', 'bully' and the workgroup. A fourth area of interest to bullying researchers is the impact of such incidents on third parties, or 'bystanders'. Our study provided a serious case of psychological injury to such a person in which the interesting point regarding sensemaking concerns the effects of past experience.

This respondent told a story of bullying by physical assault, with the victim pinned between her desk and the perpetrator, who was then pulled off the victim by another team member. The victim found the incident subsequently affected her 'rescuer' more than herself:

> *For some of the other people who were involved in this the effects have even been further-reaching than for me. The person who actually pulled her off me and tried to save me is now in a managerial role herself and is dealing with similar type issues with another staff member and she started having flashbacks about this incident. Whereas I haven't given it too much thought, this was becoming an overshadowing issue in somebody else's life who was only remotely affected.*

In this case the bystander had also been bullied and the recent incident reopened the psychological scars from the earlier one. Hoel (2004 p380) notes that the generality of such influences. Here sensemaking faces a tough job of untangling the emotional resonances and cognitive attributions of the previous event while trying to categorise the present one. In our case, if the report is accurate, the use of the label 'bully' seems difficult to question – indeed a stronger label may serve better – but we are reminded of the significance of past meanings in deriving current ones. To understand the bystander's reactions, we would like to ask similar questions concerning her sensemaking to those raised above.

CONCLUSIONS

We have proposed Weick and colleagues' model of sensemaking as an analytical tool with promising uses in helping understand how individuals come to use the categories 'bully' and 'victim'. The observations and questions raised here are a starting point for this inquiry, suggestive of the possibilities of exploring the rationalisation processes producing subjectivity in the use of these labels.

We find that sensemaking theory raises many interesting questions about an aspect of workplace behaviour that is often studied with 'objective' methods, such as surveys and questionnaires, which minimise the role of subjectivity. This goes beyond personal 'biases', for example those attributed to 'personality', past experience, or biases in person perception (e.g. stereotyping),

influences that can be studied with 'objective' methods due to their long-term stability. Sensemaking theory highlights the role of the present, the 'flow' of sensory data and the fickleness – from the longer term and more abstract perspective of much theory – of the outcomes of noticing, bracketing, comparing and labelling.

As 'bullying' is often a word used in highly emotional contexts, the sensemaking perspective may be particularly useful in alerting researchers to sources of subjectivity less relevant in other forms of problematic workplace behaviour.

In this paper we have begun differentiating the issues that arise from intrasubjective intersubjective, generic subjective and extrasubjective levels of sensemaking. There is much more to be done here, and perhaps more so the further we focus away from the intrasubjective.

Another useful future development would be to incorporate theories of emotional functioning in the workplace. These would include not only the complex processes by which individuals perceive and react emotionally, but group processes such as emotional contagion and organisational processes such as those that build and maintain emotional climates.

There is also a need to use research methods that can uncover sensemaking in bullying studies. Surveys and structured interviews are quite limited in this, and researchers should investigate the collection of stories, unstructured interviews, and other naturalistic and in-depth means of investigating sensemaking as it unfolds.

Overall our conclusion from this first step is that the use of the labels 'bully' and 'victim' is fraught with complexity, not only from the more familiar perspective of perceptual biases such as stereotyping, personality biases, or interpersonal dynamics such as political behaviour, but from the fundamental nature of labelling as retrospective rationalising with the goal of 'plausibility'. Being constructed in this way means they are influenced not only by past experience but by interpersonal dynamics, group norms, and symbolic and other institutional attempts to create meaning. They are highly context dependent and subjectively built up over time through cycles of interaction with others and observations on one's own actions.

Sensitising researchers and managers to the complex nature of sensemaking in relation to bullying and related problems in organisational behaviour seems a worthwhile goal for future research.

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