Title: Managerial control and labour process: Organisational level notions of power in the explanation of workplace bullying

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Track 1: Management, Work and Organisation

Style of presentation: Oral

The work experiences of Indian call centre agents, studied empirically via van Manen's (1998) hermeneutic phenomenology approach, strengthen the recently postulated perspective that organizational bullying is an entity by itself, distinct from interpersonal issues. Participant narratives highlighted that bullying emerges from the rigid and insensitive application of technobureaucratic controls in a highly Taylorised work environment where a transactional psychological contract assumes primacy. Participants' allusion to an oppressive work regime (Hoel & Beale, 2006) reflects Liefooghe and Mackenzie Davey's (2001) thesis that bullying can be attributed to the organisation and its practices such that bullying takes a depersonalized form where the organization is the perpetrator, invoking organisational level notions of power. The findings support Ashforth's (1994) argument that tyrannical behavior is legitimized by organizational context, paving the way for the establishment of an 'institutionalized tyranny' that absolves individual managers of the responsibility for organizational policies and practices that are predominantly out of their control while emphasizing the overriding importance of compliance.

The findings reinforce the view that changes in the global business environment necessitate increasing levels of managerial control in order to realise organisational effectiveness and competitive advantage (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf & Cooper, 2005; Hoel & Salin, 2003) such that the achievement of goals justifies the means to the point that organisations themselves become bullies (Ironside & Seifert, 2003). Workers' opportunities to resist and challenge managerial actions are also becoming more limited in the contemporary context (Hoel & Salin, 2003), increasing the power of deficit of employees (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf & Cooper, 2005). The findings of the paper are in keeping with Ironside and Seifert's (2003) stand that labour market factors are critical to the understanding of workplace bullying. In a capitalist labour market, employed work has the purpose of profit making which can only be sustained through continuous exploitation. Management enforced compliance with employer oriented norms of workplace behaviour is central to the shared experience of employment, and disciplinary sanctions to enforce the rules of the workplace remain central to the employment relationship. Bullying at work, therefore, is best not seen as the careless and casual behaviour of individual bullies but rather as part of management's exercise of its collective will to enforce workplace discipline under the contract of employment. Ironside and Seifert (2003) hold that bullying tends to become worse when the balance of inequality increasingly favours managers as

agents of the employer and when the employer comes under increased pressure to deliver profits and/or performance targets.

The issue of power remains central to the bullying debate, with an imbalance of power between the bully and the victim being emphasised (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf & Cooper, 2003; Hoel & Salin, 2003; Keashly & Jagatic, 2003). Yet the issue of power in the context of workplace bullying remains to be explored (Keashly & Jagatic, 2003; Liefooghe & Mackenzie Davey, 2001). In interpersonal terms, the implicit connotation is that the power utilised in bullying is illegitimate power, located in the individual's aggressive nature (Liefooghe & Mackensie Davey, 2001). It is precisely this argument that is challenged when organisational level notions of power are called into play. Given the nature of the labour process in a capitalist set-up, accentuated by the influences of globalisation, the line between legitimate and illegitimate power gets blurred and needs to be unravelled. As Alvesson and Deetz (1996) point out, power is fundamental to the functioning of the organisation and hence power imbalances and the inequalities they give rise to are inevitable. With power being critical to understanding the relationship between organisations and employees, the routine subjugation of employees by organisation practices may in itself be seen as constituting bullying, though organisations present these controls as being in the overall interests of employees (Liefooghe & Mackenzie Davey, 2001). The debate is succinctly summarised by Hoel and Salin (2003) who state that 'bullying may stem not so much from abusive or illegitimate use of power as from power which is considered legitimate, and tightly related to the labour process and managerial prerogative to manage' (p. 205).

In keeping with Sjotveit's (1992a &b)'s view that bullying occurs in collectively weak organizations, the best way of handling the situation is from pressures within the workplace through the mobilisation of the countervailing power of workers, usually in the form of trade union organization (Hoel & Beale, 2006; Ironside & Seifert, 2003). Yet, the presence of inclusivist and exclusivist HRM strategies (Peetz, 2002) precipitating a unitarist ideology (Lewis & Rayner, 2003) within the Indian call centre industry (Noronha & D'Cruz, 2006) serves as a major hindrance to such an endeavour.

Select references

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