

Title: The impact of inclusivist, exclusivist and unitarist HRM approaches on victims' coping with workplace bullying

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Abstract: The management of Indian call centres engages Peetz's (2002) inclusivist and exclusivist human resource management (HRM) strategies, embracing a unitarist agenda (Lewis & Rayner, 2003), to manage employer-employee relations. Exclusivist strategies include transactional psychological contracts that privilege dismissal, closure, retrenchment, layoffs, casualisation and outsourcing as well as the outright refusal to recognise and negotiate with unions. Inclusivist strategies involve the use of employee involvement schemes and human resource initiatives that emphasise employee identification with, loyalty towards and complete reliance on the employer (Peetz, 2002).

Our empirical study of work experiences of Indian call centre agents, rooted in van Manen's (1998) hermeneutic phenomenological tradition, highlighted that in instances of victimisation and bullying, the adoption of such HRM approaches finally leaves victims with no choice but to leave the organisation. Our thematic analyses found that victims move through the phases of experiencing confusion, engaging organisational options and moving inwards before finally exiting the organisation. This is so for two reasons. Firstly, inclusivist strategies ensured that human resource (HR) departments provided the only avenue of redressal for employees. While the HR department resolved routine grievances with ease, complex issues such as victimisation and bullying led to impasses because, with most bullies being victims' superiors in managerial positions, the HR department tacitly supported the bullies and failed to handle the issue impartially and fairly. Secondly, exclusivist strategies not only precipitated uncertainty and insecurity in the employment situation but also ensured the absence of union representation for employees, leaving them with absolutely no mechanism for recourse. Though participants in our study experiencing victimisation and bullying approached the HR department for assistance, they realised over the course of their interactions that HR not only was tilted in favour of their bully(s) but also was further victimising them for voicing their grievance. Having no other avenue of redressal, these participants chose to leave the organisation and seek employment elsewhere. These findings are in keeping with earlier research by Niedl (1996) and Zapf and Gross (2001) who have pointed out that bullying is a no-control situation for victims in which active and constructive coping strategies do not prove useful but often make things even worse and in which avoidance seems to be the only reasonable strategy.

The findings of the study support Lewis and Rayner's (2003) stand that contemporary HRM promotes a unitarist model of representation that confers legitimacy to managerial control, thereby representing a departure from earlier pluralistic, discursive approaches of which collective action formed a part. Operating at the core of organisational design and practice, HRM is instrumental in shaping the way organisations operate. In the context of bullying, when HRM's unitarist ideology diminishes the relevance of trade union representation, how do employees give voice to and seek justice for activities and experiences such as bullying especially if their line manager who is their representative to upper management and their first port of call in a complaints process is the bully?

Operating in the aforementioned manner, HRM as an ideology creates its own problems of morality and justice. As Miller (1998) highlights, in such instances, procedural justice becomes potentially immoral because there is an absence and/or erosion of employee representation by trade unions under HRM. The 'correctness' of managerial decisions remains largely unchecked under a non-unionized and unitarist HRM regime, with management not only being engaged in protecting organisational interests but also serving as judge and jury combined. If those managerial decisions include engaging in behaviors that are bullying or not dealing with cases of bullying, it is hard to see how this decentralized 'pure' form of HRM can function effectively.

Moreover, that such developments not only raise contentious issues about how organisational effectiveness is to be defined (Daft, 2007; Ironside & Seifert, 2003) but also reinforce the contemporary relevance of the trade union movement (Hoel & Beale, 2006; Ironside & Seifert, 2003) in spite of HRM's claim to the contrary (Guest, 1998) cannot be further underscored.

Paper:

INTRODUCTION

Empirical research on victims' coping with workplace bullying studies, by and large, support the position that victims are unable to successfully apply coping strategies to ameliorate or resolve the situation and usually exit the organisation, a response considered to be unsuccessful, maladaptive, avoidant, passive and destructive for the individual and for the organisation (Hogh & Dofradottir, 2001; Niedl, 1996; Rayner, 1997 & 1999; Zapf & Gross, 2001). What appears to be critical in determining the outcome of victims' coping response is the role of the organisation. Knorz and Zapf (in Zapf and Gross, 2001) demonstrate that objective changes in the work situation through the third party intervention of higher management facilitate successful coping even though such intervention did not encompass re-establishing the pre-bullying situation but involved separating the bully and the victim. Similarly, Zapf and Gross (2001) underscore that successful victims operate within the organisational framework in order to resolve the problem. Rayner (1999) adds to this perspective by showing how the perceived effectiveness of helping structures within organisations could be an underlying issue for high exit rates of victims. She found that in seeking redressal, victims go either to the bully directly, to the bully's boss, to personnel or to the union representative or make a group complaint, and generally 'nothing' is the reported outcome of these actions. Being labelled troublemaker, worsening of the bullying and having the allegation overruled were some of the other outcomes. Only in a few instances did bullying stop or did the bully get disciplined.

Yet, in studying the contribution of the organisation, the role of human resource management (HRM) in victims' coping has not been explored. This paper addresses this important gap. Based on an empirical inquiry of victims' experiences of workplace bullying in India's international facing call centres, the paper captures processual, temporal and contextual dimensions of victims' coping behaviour, through which the critical influence of HRM stands out.

METHOD

In the course of a phenomenological study seeking to understand the subjective work experiences of international facing call centre agents in Mumbai and Bangalore, India, where the core theme of being professional (Noronha & D'Cruz, 2009) and major theme of an oppressive work regime (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2008) were identified, 10 participants reported having been bullied. Further research, rooted in van Manen's (1998) hermeneutic phenomenology, was conducted to understand the lived experiences of this latter group and this forms the basis of the present paper. Data,

gathered through conversational interviews, were subject to sententious and selective thematic analyses (van Manen, 1998).

Of the 10 participants (6 women and 4 men) included in the study, 6 were located in Mumbai and 4 were based in Bangalore. Participants' ages ranged between 21 to 25 years, with 2 being undergraduates and the rest having completed their graduation. Nine participants were unmarried and one was married. All participants worked at agent level in different international facing call centres (5 worked in inbound processes and 5 in outbound processes; 5 worked in US (United States of America/USA) processes, 4 in UK (United Kingdom) processes and 1 in an Australian process). It is relevant to mention that for all participants, this was their first job in India's ITES-BPO (information technology enabled services-business process outsourcing) sector which houses call centres. All participants described themselves as career oriented. In keeping with this, participants worked hard and emerged as the best performers in their teams and among the best in the process. All participants were being bullied by their superiors, namely, team leaders, process managers and operations managers. None of the participants were members of unions.

WORK CONTEXT

Though participants described their work environment as an oppressive work regime (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2008), invoking the hard model of HRM (Storey, 1993), their narratives emphasised employer concern for employee well being operating through the notion of professionalism, indicating that the oppressive work regime of the hard HRM model was couched in soft terms (Storey, 1993). Employee redressal formed a significant part of this. In addition to periodic employee satisfaction surveys, skip-level meetings and open fora with superiors, employees with grievances could approach anyone in the organisation whether the CEO (chief executive officer), the TL (team leader) or someone in between via email, letters, telephone conversations or face-to-face meetings, emphasising openness of communication in terms of content, form, style and route and exemplifying a professional style of management. That the professional atmosphere in the organisation precluded the complainant's victimisation was strongly emphasised.

The interplay between the hard and soft models was managed via the employee identification process. Employer organisations cultivated the notion of professionalism in their agents as a result of which the latter saw themselves as professionals possessing superior cognitive abilities, advanced qualifications and a sense of responsibility and commitment to work and prioritizing work over personal needs and pleasure, complying with job and organisational requirements and performing optimally and rationally while on the job. Under such circumstances, not only do agents perceive job-related gains such as remuneration, designation, material artifacts, etc., accruing from their job as consistent with the notion of professionalism but also transactional psychological contracts of employment as means of discipline are similarly justified. Agents' professional identity precludes engagement with collectivization attempts, a position which suits their employers who, realising that unions would hamper the growth of the Indian ITES-BPO sector, not only refused to recognise collectivist groups but also threatened agents with dismissal and termination should they associate with them. It is no surprise, then, that participants were unaware of the existence of any unions in India's ITES-BPO sector.

Developing employee loyalty to and identification with the employer organisation, making employees completely dependent on the employer organisation for the protection of their interests, refusal to recognise trade unions and collectivist

endeavours and privileging transactional psychological contracts of employment illustrate the engagement of Peetz's (2002) inclusivist and exclusivist HRM strategies in employer organisations, adopted as a means of facilitating the organisational control process.

FINDINGS

The core theme of 'protecting my interests' captures participants' attempts to deal with the experience of bullying, relying on their personal and social resources as well as on organisational options in order to ensure that their emotional well-being, task-related performance and contributions at work and long-term career goals were not adversely and excessively hampered on account of victimisation. Participants' endeavours displayed two prominent features: the presence of turning points, indicative of stages, in spite of the complexity of the experience and the critical role of HRM in influencing multiple facets of the experience. Major themes were organised around these defining characteristics and are presented below.

Experiencing Confusion

Participants were able to identify when the experience of bullying began, only in retrospect. During the initial onset period, they did not realise that they were being bullied. Being immersed in their work, they did not pick up the signs of their victimisation. When they did become aware of the change in the bully's behaviour towards them, they attributed it to the oppressive work environment and responded to the situation professionally, stepping up their performance. They opined that the bully had no reason to bully them, given both that there was no conflict between them and that their performance was outstanding. Moreover, there was no room for irrational behaviour in a professional environment. Yet, the continuation of the bully's behaviour made it hard for participants to completely ignore it, and careful observation of the situation helped them realise that they were being bullied. While bullying behaviours ranged from isolation, personal attacks, verbal threats and task-related difficulties, participants pointed out that the basic motive behind their superiors' bullying was a sense of threat and discomfort with their outstanding performance.

Engaging Organisational Options

Following identification of the problem, participants decided to engage intra-organisational redressal mechanisms. Given the employer organisation's stated commitment to professionalism and employee well-being, participants believed that intra-organisational redressal mechanisms would work appropriately to provide them with justice. Yet, approaching the HR (human resources) department proved to be a turning point in that participants experienced further victimisation. Not only did the HR department scapegoat them but also the bully's behaviour worsened because of both the complaint made against him/her as well as the support he/she enjoyed within the organisation, particularly with the HR department. Participants pointed out that while the onus was always on them to follow up the status of their grievance with the HR department, the latter neither took the initiative to contact them nor provided them with a response in writing. Moreover, it was common for HR managers to express disbelief at participants' experiences and blame participants for the situation, insinuating either that the participant had done something wrong to invite such behaviour from his/her superior(s) and/or that the participant was unable to cope and adjust. Participants were admonished to be 'sports' and not complain and to think in terms of their long term career prospects and interests. Participants' professionalism and commitment to their work and to the employer organisation were also questioned. Participants also discerned an increase in their superior's bullying behaviour. Not only did bullying increase in frequency and intensity but was

accompanied by taunts about the participant having approached the HR department and about the futility and foolhardiness of such a move in the light of managerial unity. Bullies would make public references to the situation such that the matter became known to participants' colleagues on the call floor. Participants reported being doubly victimised and had to cope with a very difficult situation. Describing their position as that of having been cornered, participants spoke of severe emotional strain. A growing distrust towards the employer organisation emerged. At the same time, participants recognised that the absence of extra-organisational third-party intervention such as legal mechanisms or employee unions/associations, as per their knowledge based on organisational inputs and popular perceptions, left them completely alone in their quest for justice. Helplessness was pervasive.

Moving Inwards

Under the circumstances, it was not surprising that participants began to withdraw into themselves. Severe emotional strain encompassing depression, anxiety, hopelessness, meaninglessness and uncertainty and resulting in ill-health and alienation from work was experienced. With both their health and performance suffering, participants reported that their situation was untenable. Participants became introspective, being engaged in a sensemaking and restructuring endeavour. Weighing their options, participants believed that their most practical step was to quit the organisation and seek employment elsewhere. All the participants highlighted that the deluge of job opportunities in India's ITES-BPO sector helped them make such a decision. In their view, it was wiser to move out of a hostile and unjust situation rather than to fight a losing and lonely battle. Given the dynamics of the ITES-BPO job market, they did not anticipate any major career disruptions. All participants reported that a positive outlook emerged following their decision to quit the organisation.

Exiting the Organisation

When participants decided to quit their current organisation and seek employment elsewhere, their decision was a well considered one, not made in haste or desperation. Accordingly, their search was not random but proceeded according to their specific preferences. While all of them remained within the ambit of international facing call centers, they attempted to choose processes and shifts in keeping with their preferences and long-term career plans and to garner vertical career moves. By and large, they were successful. Participants reported that moving out of the employer organisation left them with mixed feelings. On the positive side, participants regained a sense of control over their lives and appreciated the opportunity to start afresh. A sense of well-being was apparent. On the negative side, participants felt that they had been overpowered and were incapable of successfully fighting injustice. Loss of self esteem was reported. Participants expressed their uncertainty over being able to handle a similar situation in the future. Ambivalence thus accompanied their exit from the organisation.

In the months following their exit from the bullying situation, three participants heard about UNITES (Union for ITES Professionals) Professional, an association that represents employee interests in the ITES-BPO sector, and one participant heard about the case of Ms. A versus Organisation X (an international facing ITES-BPO organisation in Mumbai) wherein Ms A sought and successfully received legal redressal for her complaint of workplace sexual harassment. These participants, realising that there were various extra-organisational avenues to protect them, felt much stronger in the knowledge that these options allowed them the opportunity to successfully fight injustice rather than be cowered down by it.

DISCUSSION

In delineating the role of HRM in victims' experiences, the study breaks new ground in uncovering the organisation's etiological role in workplace bullying. Contrary to Knorz and Zapf's (in Zapf and Gross, 2001) and Zapf and Gross's (2001) findings that organisational intervention is critical to resolving the problem and facilitating successful coping, the findings show that HRM as a managerial ideology creates an environment in which bullying remains unchallenged, allowed to thrive or actually encouraged in an indirect way (Lewis & Rayner, 2003). This goes against common associations of HRM as having the greatest involvement in matters of workplace bullying in terms of policy, procedure and a mediating role (Lewis & Rayner, 2003). Instead, by specifically pinpointing the contribution of HRM strategies, the findings extend Rayner's (1999) view that seeking redress adversely affects both the bullying situation and victims' coping. Indeed, the espousal of inclusivist and exclusivist HRM strategies creates a situation where HRM operates as one-sided managerialism which privileges employer organisations' interests rather than as true unitarism which engages employers and employees together in the employment relationship (Lewis & Rayner, 2003). Issues of justice and morality inevitably arise. Miller's (1998) procedural justice and outcome justice are particularly relevant. With managers being judge and jury combined, the correctness of managerial decisions remains largely unchecked under such a unitarist managerial HRM regime (Lewis & Rayner, 2003).

Interestingly, then, though the absence of discursive and pluralist ideologies limited alternatives available to agents both in terms of world views and actions, no greater is their relevance than in the context of unitarist managerial HRM. Thus, while HRM is portrayed as diminishing the need for trade union representation through its central principle of commitment (Guest, 1998), that trade unions have survived and are being revived indicates that HRM's unitarist ideology has not been wholly successful. That bullying accounts for some part of the reason why HRM's unitarist ideology has broken down cannot be denied (Lewis & Rayner, 2003). Ironside and Seifert (2003) and Hoel and Beale (2006) assert that solutions to workplace bullying essentially lie in pluralist approaches through collectivist endeavours. Bullying is less likely to occur and is more likely to be tackled when it does occur if there is a strong and well organised trade union presence at the workplace (Ironside & Seifert, 2003).

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