Restructuring and workplace bullying in the Australian public sector[i]

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Abstract

This article examines links between organisational restructuring and workplace bullying. It draws on the international workplace bullying literature and data gathered from a study into workplace bullying in Australian public sector organisations. The study's findings show that while the literature presents workplace bullying as a problem of individualised behaviour, policy actors were more likely to identify how different and intersecting organisational factors such as restructuring interact to produce the power relations necessary to facilitate and support bullying as a legitimate organisational strategy. In fact, in some instances subjects presented the organisation itself, through restructuring policies and practices, as perpetrator. Further, these findings challenge the efficacy public sector policies to respond adequately to workplace bullying.

Keywords: workplace bullying, restructuring, public sector

Introduction

Over the past two decades, workplace bullying has captured the attention of a broad coalition of interests and become a powerful concept that is used to articulate a wide range of complaints about the modern workplace (McCarthy 2003). Much of the concern has been shaped by a significant body of literature that has concentrated on the effects of workplace bullying on individuals and the costs to organisations. In 2010, the Australian Productivity Commission (APC 2010) estimated that workplace bullying cost the country an annual $14.8 billion, a figure based on direct costs including absenteeism, staff turnover and compensation claims. The Commission also determined that between 2.5 and 5 million Australians will be exposed to workplace bullying in some form either as a target or bystander, and as a result may suffer many detrimental effects to their physical and psychological well-being, as well as a reduction in job satisfaction, confidence and employment prospects.

Much of the research into workplace bullying shows that workplace bullying is more prevalent in the public sector than in the private sector. As a consequence, Australian governments have responded swiftly and all Commonwealth, State and Territory governments have introduced policies to manage the problem in their own public sector agencies. Yet, despite this swift response, as in other parts of the world, there is little evidence that these policies have been effective in the prevention of workplace bullying.

This article contends that policy weakness is due to the way in which workplace bullying is framed as a problem of individual behaviour ignoring other elements such as gender, race, organisational policies, strategies and context. The article draws on a larger study into workplace bullying and concentrates on three questions:

- Why has workplace bullying only recently emerged as a serious issue in the Australian public sector?

- How does organisational restructuring impact on workplace bullying?

- How do representations of workplace bullying affect policy responses?

Theoretically, the article draws on more recent theorisations of workplace bullying that place the organisation at the centre of the analysis and methodologically on recognition of the multiplicity of possible explanations and meanings that '...arise not from language but institutional practice, from power relations, from social position. Words and concepts change their meaning and their effects as they are deployed within different contexts' (Ball 1990, p. 18). Consistent with these theoretical perspectives, the study used a qualitative approach and interview data gathered from policy actors located in Australian public sector organisations.

Workplace Bullying

Workplace bullying, despite its comparatively short history as an issue for academic enquiry, has generated a significant body of research that is nonetheless within a narrow band of theorisation. The dominant theorisation of workplace bullying emphasises its interpersonal nature and is defined by a set of specific characteristics. First, workplace bullying occurs between individuals who work in the same organisation. Second, one person acts towards the other in such a way as to cause the target harm or disadvantage through actual behaviour or the perceived threat of harm. Third, for harmful behaviour to be deemed workplace bullying, it must occur on a regular and sustained basis and cannot be limited to a single or isolated act. Finally, a power imbalance needs to exist between the perpetrator and the target (Einarsen *et al* 2003).

Using this definitional framework as the benchmark, researchers have produced a significant body of information that has provided a picture of workplace bullying framed by the behaviour and situations which meet the precise definitional tests. Thus, workplace bullying is generally understood and presented as being perpetrated by a supervisor or manager using their hierarchically-based power to bully a subordinate. The behaviour is both overt and covert. Common examples of overt bullying are: verbal abuse, including swearing shouting, intimidation through insults and sarcasm and public humiliation (Chappell & Di Martino 2000; Einarsen *et al* 2003; Hoel *et al*. 2001; Michelson 2001; McCarthy *et al*. 1995). The most reported covert bullying includes: malicious gossip, excluding individuals from information and activities relevant to their jobs or career opportunities; undermining someone's performance and sabotaging or stealing people's equipment (Hoel *et al*. 2001; Keashly 2001; McCarthy *et al*. 1995; Wallis Group 2001).

Not surprisingly, individualising of the problem has also shaped organisational policies introduced as a response to workplace bullying (Hutchinson 2008). However, neither the large body of research nor the resulting policies appear to have made any significant impact on the prevention of workplace bullying (Chappell & Di Martino 2000; Di Martino *et al* 2003; Hoel *et al*. 2001). In an attempt to explain the limited progress towards prevention, the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Di Martino *et al* 2003) concluded that the dominance of traditional theoretical perspectives that focussed on the individualised elements of the problem were inadequate in themselves to explain and therefore respond effectively to workplace bullying. Further, the accompanying positivist methodologies have been considered unlikely to capture other elements of workplace bullying

that have become more evident in much broader conceptualisations arising from qualitative studies (Rayner & McIvor 2006). Alternatively, some researchers argue that a gap exists between the dominant theorisations of workplace bullying and the way many workers represent the problem (Liefooghe & Mackenzie Davey 2003; McCarthy 2003). For example, the psychological perspective and positivist methodologies tend to reduce workplace bullying to problems that are observable individual behaviours, rather than systemic, less visible acts, and therefore overlook the nuances and dimensions of power relations (Liefooghe & Mackenzie Davey 2003) such as gender (Jones 2006; Simpson & Cohen 2004), race (Fox & Stallworth 2005; Lewis & Gunn 2007) and organisational policies and context (Bacchi 1999; Dale & Acik 2005).

These alternative explanations of workplace bullying draw on '…notions of social construction of workplace bullying' (Lewis 2002, p. 28) and reveal that people construct workplace bullying in many different ways that move beyond the strict classical definitions. Many of these accounts of workplace bullying are linked to a 'normalizing' of workplace bullying in high-pressured, competitive working environments' (Ironside & Siefert 2003; McCarthy *et al.* 1995), where the line between legitimate organisational activity and workplace bullying begins to blur. This appears to be evident in public sector organisations that are consistently reported as having a higher incidence of workplace bullying than private business (Lewis 2006; Zapf 2003; Hoel & Cooper 2000). The limited analysis of this situation has focussed on the idea that individuals engaged in 'emotional labour' (i.e. traditional public service areas like health, education, social welfare and public administration) have a higher level of personal engagement than people working in for example manufacturing (Hoschild 1983; Zapf *et al*. 2003). Therefore working relationships are more highly charged and contribute to workplaces vulnerable to bullying. However, this explanation overlooks two important elements of workplace bullying and the public sector. First, is that workplace bullying began to emerge as a public sector problem around the same time as significant changes to public sector management were introduced through New Public Management (NPM). Second, besides a higher incidence of workplace bullying, research using qualitative methodologies reveals that public sector workers are more likely to see the organisation as being actively involved in workplace bullying as either facilitator (Ashforth 1994) or perpetrator (Liefooghe & Mackenzie Davey 2001, 2003; Lewis 2002). In a similar vein, Salin (2003) describes the organisation through its policies and strategies as actively enabling, motivating and precipitating workplace bullying.

Public sector workers regularly provide examples of workplace bullying that include unreasonable workloads, deadlines and working hours (Lewis 2002; McCarthy 2003; Sheehan 2001; Simpson & Cohen 2004); employee surveillance (Liefooghe & Mackenzie Davey 2001); withholding of performance-based rewards (Mullen 1997); leadership (Hodson *et al* 2006; Hoel & Salin 2003); high pressured competitive environments (Braverman 2002; O'Moore *et al. 1*998); lack of job security (Baron and Neuman 1998); work intensification (Ironside & Siefert 2003; Kenny 2002; McCarthy 1995; Sheehan 1996, 1998) and organisational culture (Brodsky 1976; Hoel & Salin 2003). In particular, the link between organisational restructuring and workplace bullying (a key strategy of contemporary public sector management) is a dominant theme (Hoel *et al.* 2001; Kenny 2002; Lewis 2002; McCarthy *et al*. 1995; Sheehan 2001).

Public Sector Restructuring and Workplace Bullying

The NPM framework is based on the assumption that the efficiency and effectiveness of the public sector can be improved by strategies and tools traditionally associated with private

sector organizations (Colley 2001). The most dominant of these strategies is organisational restructuring, a term that has been used rhetorically to describe an organisational response to external and contextual pressures often economic in nature (Hirsch & De Soucey 2006, p. 171; Frenkel 2003). Specific restructuring strategies that effect workers include growth in subcontracting and outsourcing, flattening of organisational hierarchies, downsizing of the permanent workforce, changes to types of work, more flexible forms of employment such as part-time, short-term and casual and the burgeoning use of virtual communication. These changes have contributed significantly to a shift in organisational power relations in favour of management and, consequently, this power imbalance heightens the risk of workplace bullying (Hodson *et al* 2006; Salin 2003).

In order for managers to be able to use these strategies to achieve the performance measures for which they are accountable, restructuring has also delivered a reduction and elimination of identified constraints contained in internal administrative systems and employment regulation covering recruitment, hours of work, employee tenure and termination arrangements (Simpson 1998). The increase in individual managerial prerogative is further enhanced by a diminished role of third parties such as unions but also centrally located personnel departments or functional human resources specialists including industrial relations and equity practitioners who act as moderating influences between workers and managers (Hughes and O'Neill 2000). Ironside and Siefert (2003) identify bullying as an increasingly active dimension of public sector management assisted by the changing nature of work and the employment contract. Consequently, public sector managers are provided with increased power and discretion in the way they manage workers to ensure that they meet increasing demands for outcomes in a reduced resource environment (Colley 2001; Noblet *et al.* 2006).

The impact of restructuring on the 'doing' of leadership is seen by some researchers as the most important aspect of workplace bullying in the public sector. That more coercive leadership, or bullying, is becoming a common feature of contemporary public sector organisations is supported by research undertaken in the UK (Burchill 1998; Ironside & Siegert 2003; Shain 2000; Simpson & Cohen 2004) and Australia (McCarthy *et al.* 1995; McCarthy *et al.* 2003; Thompson 2002; Thornton 2004). As reports of workplace bullying increase, there is a view that restructuring has meant that workplace bullying is not:

> …the careless and casual behaviour of individual bullies but rather is part of management's exercise of its collective will to enforce workplace discipline under the contract of employment. Hence we see all forms of bullying and harassment at work as part of the day-to-day routine of managing labour (Ironside & Siefert 2003, p. 384).

In short, bullying emerges from much of the literature as a normative aspect of public sector management (McCarthy 2004; Ironside & Siefert 2003) and is legitimised and justified by the achievement of organisational objectives of efficiency and productivity, by any means, even those that may, like restructuring, be coercively applied.

Theory and Method

This study adopts a theoretical approach and methodological reasoning that recognises the multiplicity of possible explanations and meanings (Catley & Jones 2001). This perspective carries post modernist overtones which allow for new explanatory frameworks to be applied that can expand our understandings of workplace bullying (Liefooghe & Mackenzie Davey 2003; McCarthy 2003), and highlight the significance of power and knowledge in creating

dominant meanings (Foucault 1980). Rather than develop conclusive evidence, the study aimed to expand knowledge about workplace bullying, by building themes and strands of meaning (Patton 1990).

This paper draws material from a larger study into workplace bullying in Australian public service administrations (author 2008). The term 'public service administration' refers to that part of each public service jurisdiction that is concerned with how government employment policy is executed within public sector agencies. The public service was chosen as the site for the study for two reasons. First, although limited, much of the Australian research into workplace bullying has focussed on public sector organisations (McCarthy 2004; Mayhew & McCarthy 2005; Omari 2003), while a significant number of international studies have also been located in this sector. Second, all public service administrations around Australia have introduced workplace bullying policies so they provided a rich source of data for understanding how policies are applied. To understand how workplace bullying is constructed within the social policy setting context of an organisation, semi-structured interviews with policy actors were used. 'Policy actors' refers to those people who are engaged at some stage with the policy process. At all stages of a policy process there are a number of actors who are involved with policy implementation. Some of these participants are directly engaged in the actual administration and implementation of policy while others attempt to influence the direction that public policy will take as a result of how it is administered and implemented. Policy actors also bring with them considerable discretion in interpreting the actual intent, method, and scope of a policy decision and therefore, to some extent, can redefine the intent of a policy action thereby becoming de facto policy-makers in the process (Theodoulou & Kofinis, 2004). Further, Bacchi (1999) points to the effect of policy being very much dependent on how policy actors defend and disseminate the policy problem.

Three design issues framed the study. First, different policy interests and perspectives needed to be represented. Second, women and men were to be equally represented. Third, the study was seeking to draw conclusions about Australian public service organisations, rather than being confined to one particular administration. The final subject group comprised 17 women and 15 men, working in public service administrations from four Australian states, one Australian Territory and the Commonwealth public service.

The interviewees comprised three groups: eleven senior managers, ten employee advocates and eleven policy implementors. Senior managers are people who occupy first or second tier management positions in an agency. Employee advocates are union organisers or people from independent workers' advocacy centres. Policy implementors are professionals drawn from either human resources, industrial relations, occupational health and safety or equity contexts. The interviews were face-to-face and conducted over an eight month period. As a means of identifying the informants, yet ensuring anonymity, each person was allocated a pseudonym plus an occupational descriptor.

Some of the findings from this study are presented in three sections below. The first gives an insight into how policy actors link workplace bullying and restructuring. The second focuses on the impact of workplace bullying and managers. The third section examines how policy actors perceive policy responses to workplace bullying.

Findings

(i)   Workplace bullying and restructuring: 'Constant change and constant demands'

The interviews for this study demonstrate how elusive it can be to consistently define workplace bullying. Martin, a senior manager, commented that: '…interviewing people about workplace bullying must be like working on the tower of Babel'. However, all interviewees gave at least one example of workplace bullying that reflected individualised theories of workplace bullying including shouting, swearing or public embarrassment. Yet this did not mean that they simply viewed bullying as the discrete acts of individuals. Rather, twenty-eight of the thirty-two interviewees also represented workplace bullying as both a result of, and a response to, aspects of restructuring. Nikala, a senior manager, asked: 'what is it [workplace bullying] about? ...it's an expression of increased pressures in the workplace. Constant change and constant demands that never stop'.

The themes of 'constant change and constant demands' were interwoven throughout all thirty two interviews. Eighteen policy actors pointed to the intensification of work as arising from a combination of increased restructuring, less people and increased managerial accountability. Linda, a senior manager, explained:

> People complain about less staff, more work, meaningless accountability procedures and no end in sight, so it makes it very stressful for everyone. Who's going to stand up and say enough? Not me, I want my job.

Interviewees often pointed to the sheer volume of work as a serious aspect of restructuring and was both a form of workplace bullying and a contributor to bullying situations (see also Berkowitz 1989). Sean, a policy implementor, encapsulated this view: 'I know it's not an excuse [for bullying], but heavy workloads stress people out and can lead to nastiness'. Mike, an employee advocate, elaborated:

> The competing demands that people have to meet mean that there is no longer room for relationships to develop... this means in trying to get something done, people speak to each other in a much more abrupt manner or behave towards each other in a more assertive... aggressive behaviour.

Many of the interviewees grappled to explain how organisational policy and strategy like restructuring was itself bullying or whether it was how it was applied. Gina, a senior manager, provided the most coherent explanation:

> When you have an organisation that sees meeting economic objectives as paramount and has a policy of restructuring and job loss to achieve those objectives then I think that policy fits the definitions of bullying. Well, it has the effect of actually harming people through actual job loss but also the fear of it. You don't even have to have an individual manager or department head actually restructure because it [restructuring policy] looms large over everyone in the public sector.

Gina was not alone in believing that an endorsed and favoured policy of restructuring can constitute workplace bullying. Other interviewees indicated that the embedded nature of restructuring policy created worker insecurity and caused a breakdown in the relationship between the employing organisation and workers. Seven policy actors used the term 'expendable' to describe how workers feel about their place in the organisation. On this issue, Miguel encapsulated the general feeling of this group:

> People don't feel valued any more – themselves personally or the work they do. When you are expendable you can feel unvalued and also worried about your future. So you're more likely to put up with shit from your boss because you're afraid of what will happen otherwise.

Miguel points to both the general effects of restructuring policies on workers as well as introducing the idea that at a local level the threat and reality of restructuring can be used effectively to achieve worker compliance. In the next section, the impact of restructuring on the role and behaviour of managers will be discussed.

(ii)   Restructuring and managers: 'Managers are a lot tougher now'

Twenty-two of the interviewees believed that workers saw organisational restructuring as impacting the role and actions of managers. Restructuring strategies such as downsizing and outsourcing are used to bully workers through the fear of losing their jobs. This view was particularly true of employee advocates, of whom eight argued that restructuring activities are used as a specific management device because of their practical and implied effects. Mike's observations effectively reflect the employee advocates' general sentiments: 'The impact of restructuring is very visible. Jobs go and people go too'. John, another employee advocate, considered the potential threat of restructuring was also a covert type of workplace bullying: 'Sometimes the existence of a threat is more powerful than the actual event or carrying out the threat'. Seven policy implementors also concluded that restructuring activities and the fear of consequent job loss or job change were emerging trends in the control and management of workers. Charlie, a policy implementor, observed:

> Some managers don't bother with managing performance in the right way. Why go through all of that hassle when part of the expected yearly budget process is restructuring and job loss. Means that you can use one process meant for another purpose to get rid of staff.

At the same time, the desire to mitigate the responsibility of individual managers was a recurring theme across all of the policy actor groups. Twenty-five interviewees expressed sympathy for managers who they saw as also being vulnerable to coercive demands from their supervisors and, so, were also fearful of losing their jobs or as Gina, senior manager, commented 'restructured out of existence'.

The majority of policy actors portrayed managers as vulnerable to the same sorts of anxieties and insecurities as workers. Three policy implementors used the term 'management sandwich' to describe the predicament of managers who might feel pressured or harassed from above as well as from below. Judith, an employee advocate, recounted a story that reflects how many interviewees saw the pervasiveness of restructuring as a coercive strategy:

> …there was a group of managers… and three of them raised the issue that they'd been managers a long time and were probably above middle management. Their performance was now tied to how far under budget they came in. You used to be assessed as doing a good job coming in 'on budget'. How could you be assessed now? Either losing jobs or cutting services, doing more with less. These three out of about eight identified it as obviously a concern for them. …it identified for them a major change in the relationship that they had…it provided them with some level of discomfort or stress. One of them said, 'I should just get up and leave but I'm too old to leave. I'm going to retire in five years so where would I go?'

This story vividly demonstrates how restructuring strategies have been positioned as central to achieving primary organisational outcomes of efficiency, and are also perceived as a consequence for failing to achieve these outcomes. The inherent contradictions of this approach centre on the extent to which managers can develop a relationship with employees that achieves personal commitment in the face of enhanced managerial control aimed at achieving the cheapest, quickest and easiest outcome (Allan *et al.* 1999). In practical terms, this contradiction is made real through downsizing, increased workloads, job insecurity and what Denenberg and Braverman (1999, p. 15) describe as 'the decay of group cohesion and communication'.

(iii) Policy responses to workplace bullying: 'Why bother complain – better to suffer in silence or leave'

Two issues emerged from the discussion with policy actors about what policy recourse was available to deal with workplace bullying complaints that related to restructuring. First, policy actors believed that the traditional formal industrial mechanisms that moderated power imbalances and allowed workers to legitimately challenge decisions that affected their employment are disappearing (see Kelly 2006).

Fifteen policy actors believed that the systematic dismantling of these processes had shifted power to the already powerful and thus created a greater power imbalance in favour of management. Jeff, an employee advocate, explained:

> There used to be avenues for appeal about most things. Now very few of these exist so when someone believes that they have been treated badly in a performance review or contract renewal, there's not much they can do.

Wayne, an employee advocate, claimed that a weakened industrial system and declining union role were compromising the position of workers. Commenting specifically on restructuring he explained:

> We still have clauses in most agreements that are called organisational change. This is a euphemism for restructuring and job loss. When these clauses were first introduced nearly 20 years ago there was an onus on the employer to provide very detailed justification to the union for the changes and there was a long consultation process. Now it [restructuring] is happening constantly and these safety provisions have been watered down a lot.

The second theme that emerged was the ineffectiveness of specific workplace bullying policies to respond to restructuring-related complaints. Twenty four policy actors, including eight policy implementors, considered the narrow representations of workplace bullying in policy as a barrier to effectively responding to problems related to organisational processes such as restructuring. Greg, a policy implementor, explained:

> If you want to prevent a problem, then you have to know what the problem is and isn't, what causes it and focus on those… That's our problem, our policy deals with a problem but it's not the right one.

While Greg believed that workplace bullying policies were not focused on the 'right' problem, other policy actors, like Jennifer, an employee advocate, were more concerned with the fact that there was only *one* problem representation:

> So the problem I've got as far as the bullying policy is concerned, it portrays bullying purely as an interpersonal conflict. I think there probably is a bit of that - But that then

fails to acknowledge often how people use power and things ...workload and deadlines... tools that are used to bully people.

Individualising the problem creates scenarios in which organisational processes are merely the backdrop for the personal interplay between workers. Such processes are seen to be passive and unobtrusive, providing assistance to individuals to deal with these personal problems. David, an employee advocate, explained:

If you look at the policy, you will see that the organisation is barely mentioned. Everything is written about you the employee having problems with another individual employee often your supervisor – the onus is upon you to sort it out.

However, some of the policy actors who acknowledged that policies were aimed primarily at individualised bullying and unable to respond to bullying claims about restructuring defended the distinction. Craig, a policy implementor, reflected the views of many of his peers when he outlined his position:

Look I am a level 6 and not a supervisor. I'm not paid to take on the organisation or a manager and if I was I don't think I'd do it anyway. When it comes to workplace bullying I'm there really to make sure there's training, policies distributed and maybe to advise someone how to lodge a complaint.

In general, policy implementors tended to advocate for policies in which problem representations were simple and observable, with resolution processes that were easy to administer. Thus, support for, and defence of, narrow workplace bullying representations were in part motivated by some policy actors' desire for a manageable process, and one that was unlikely to incur backlash and resistance. Sherry, a policy implementor, described some of the broad representations of workplace bullying that she and other policy implementors believed were beyond their scope:

Oh you know, 'I'm stressed', 'I'm harassed', 'I've been made redundant'. Can you imagine the bloody chaos? There's no way I could deal with those complaints

Sherry's spirited rejection of broader representations of workplace bullying points to some of the reasons for, and difficulties of, narrow representations. When asked why she couldn't 'deal with' complaints of stress or redundancy, Sherry responded:

The workplace bullying policy doesn't deal with those sorts of issues. If someone is stressed – they'll say it's their boss or work. Well, we all have too much work to do, even managers. And redundancies, well that's a management decision isn't it, not something I can or should have to deal with. I'm there to help when someone claims that someone else is being awful to someone else such as shouting at them or being aggressive.

Despite acknowledging different representations of workplace bullying, Sherry offers a strong defence of narrow definitions. She identifies that workplace bullying is sometimes represented as 'stress', but dismisses this representation on the grounds that such stresses are 'normal' and suffered by all: 'We all have too much work to do, even managers.' Similarly, while acknowledging that redundancies can also be represented as workplace bullying, Sherry identifies this characterisation as being outside the policy's scope because redundancies are a 'management decision' and therefore beyond her professional remit.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article highlights how workplace bullying can be constructed as being deeply embedded in a range of organisational processes such as organisational restructuring. These representations of workplace bullying run counter to the dominant theorisations of workplace bullying as an individualised problem and point to much more complex explanations.

Broadly, policy actors interviewed for this study considered that restructuring was linked to workplace bullying in the public sector in three ways. First, the organisation's commitment to restructuring to achieve budgetary outcomes through job loss was considered to be oppressive and created anxiety in individual workers and a breakdown in the relationships between the employer and workers. Second, restructuring strategies can play what Salin (2001) describes as enabling, motivating and precipitating roles in the production of workplace bullying. As an enabler of workplace bullying, restructuring strategies such as downsizing and outsourcing combined with flexible employment, increased managerial prerogative and power over workers' employment. Restructuring strategies such as internal competition, individualised reward systems and fear of job loss act as motivators by creating incentives for bullying behaviour. As a precipitator of workplace bullying, the significance of restructuring policies to organisational management creates an environment of ongoing change and uncertainty for individual workers and groups.

The advent of NPM was presented as creating an environment in which bullying becomes a possibility as managers, perhaps threatened themselves, respond to the stress of budgetary pressures (Ironside & Siefert 2003; Lee 2002; McCarthy 2004b; McCarthy *et al.* 1995; Sheehan 1999). As managers become individually responsible for meeting performance objectives related to reducing both budgets and delivery timeframes, there is a high risk that they will exercise managerial prerogative in ways that may constitute bullying (Hoel & Cooper 1999). A dominant theme in the interviews was that the requirement for ongoing organisational restructuring and downsizing may support those management practices that result in what McCarthy *et al*. (1995, p. 47), observe as the '…lowering of thresholds at which inappropriately coercive managerial behaviours manifest in organisational life'.

The implications of these findings for the prevention of workplace bullying appear grim. Policy actors showed little or no confidence in the capacity of current policies to be able to effectively respond to workplace bullying as a problem of organisational restructuring. Instead, while clearly contradicting their broader representations of workplace bullying as an organisational problem or strategy, policy actors that it was impractical and unrealistic for policies to deal with workplace bullying other than individualised situations of a perpetrator and a target. This position is understandable. For if we accept that restructuring policies and strategies are favoured tools for both managing budgets and controlling workers in the public sector, then it is doubtful that there will be any attraction to public policy makers in framing these embedded approaches as workplace bullying. However, despite this pessimistic view, there remains wide scope for further exploration by researchers and practitioners of these broader constructions of workplace bullying.

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[i] This paper has been peer reviewed by two anonymous referees