

# Workplace bullying – interim findings of a study in further and higher education in Wales

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**Abstract** *This paper reports on an exploratory study on workplace bullying in further education and higher educational institutions in Wales. Coverage of the study compared perceptions and experiences across six areas: workplace bullying, sexual harassment, racial harassment, sex discrimination, unfair promotional opportunities, and reduced promotion opportunities. The study methodology incorporated structured interviews with 20 key informants, a postal survey of higher/further education trade union members (NATFHE) in Wales, and in depth interviews with a small number of victims of bullying. Respondents hear of workplace bullying primarily from the broadcast media and not through internal communications. Respondents to the survey had experienced higher levels of workplace bullying than they experienced sex discrimination, sexual harassment or racial harassment. As a source of hearing about bullying, colleagues appear to provide a link that enables victims to admit to their own suffering. The perceived reasons for the bullying are linked to poor managerial training.*

## Introduction

Adams with Crawford (1992) brought workplace bullying to the attention of the public in the UK. By the early-mid 1990s, a plethora of press and media articles suggested that bullying was endemic in UK workplaces. UK literature at this time was sparse with only Rayner (1995) making some attempt at a more rigorous disciplined methodological approach. The mid 1990s also saw significant interest develop from the legal profession, trade unions and the media and training consultants, all perhaps with a keen self interest to promote workplace bullying as a serious issue. Research in the UK at this time was reactive, hasty and lacking rigor but mainland European interest and research appeared far more advanced in methodological terms. Much of the research extended from Scandinavia through Germany and Austria, from researchers such as Einarsen and Skogstad (1996), Leymann (1990, 1992), Leymann and Gustafsson (1996), Zapf *et al.* (1996) and Neidl (1996) among others. Further afield, Australian academics McCarthy *et al.* (1995) McCarthy *et al.* (1996) and McCarthy *et al.* (1998) were also conducting research. The literature from the USA did not use the term “bullying” during this period, preferring to discuss it under the headings of employee abuse and harassment (see Bassman (1992) and Wright and Smye (1996)).

This early period of interest also saw many debates surrounding two key issues. First, considerable methodological difficulties arose, not least of which were definition on the one hand (“bullying”, “mobbing” and “abuse” are all widely used depending on the geographical location of the authors) and, on the other,

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how bullying differs, if indeed it does, from workplace harassment. Second, the absence of a literature base in some instances resulted in unsubstantiated claims and weak methodology. It therefore followed that UK researchers, particularly, had to adopt a more rigorous and disciplined methodology to give credibility to their own data and to question the validity and reliability of existing literature. Much of this early literature and indeed the work being published today (1998), had a heavy focus and emphasis on both quantitative data and the psychological perspectives of workplace bullying. While quantitative data have value and enable the researcher and reader alike to gain an insight into the nature and pattern of workplace bullying, they provide little help in distinguishing the substantial meanings and experiences of people affected by workplace bullying (victim or perpetrator). Nor do they help those who come into regular contact with such events, namely trade union officials and personnel staff. The study of workplace bullying is still in its infancy, and very little is known about the thoughts, accounts, responses and tactics of all those involved. A qualitative approach allows for the exploration of these social realities and social speculations. In addition, a qualitative approach allows respondents to “speak for themselves” and as such, there is less likely to be the imposition of the researcher’s own values and responses on to the situation being studied.

Current evidence being presented in the UK appears to be adopting a more rigorous methodology. A number of key researchers are questioning the validity and reliability of not only the research itself but also of the tactics and approaches being adopted by some to deal with bullying (see Crawford, 1998; Liefoghe and Olafsson, 1998; Rayner, 1998). At a recent post-conference symposium, the 1998 Research Update Conference – Staffordshire University UK, researchers from as far afield as Japan, Australia, Norway and Germany debated the fundamental question of definition as well as the nature and extent of what actually constitutes the use of the term bullying. This at least places workplace bullying firmly on the UK research agenda and not simply left in the domain of the magazine and broadcast features where much of the existing evidence has originated. Similarly, the term “workplace bullying” is becoming established, albeit slowly, in the US domain through the use of dedicated Internet Web sites and symposia groups led by academics among others.

The intention of this paper is not to debate the literature on the “state of play” of research into workplace bullying because much of the related evidence is prone to methodological criticism. Even where the literature is systematic, it is critical that anyone with more than a passing interest in this subject reads for themselves the nature and extent of the debate and draws their own conclusions rather than relying on the selective précis of others. Rather the aim of this paper is to test in a likely sector of employment, the incidences and cases of workplace bullying as well as an insight into some of the findings of a study of workplace bullying among the further and higher education academic community in Wales both from a qualitative and quantitative standpoint.

In order to overcome some of the criticisms of existing UK evidence and generally poor methodology, and to permit triangulation, data were gathered

from a variety of sources. Sources included: interviews with 20 (to date) personnel officers and trade union officers (key informants); postal survey data from lecturers who were members of a trade union; and in-depth interviews with victims/targets of bullying. This approach would hopefully provide a complete picture of the nature and extent of bullying in a specific UK employment sector. The survey element targeted members of the College and University lecturers' trade union NATFHE in Wales. Members were sampled from both further and higher education covering a total of 32 different institutions. The headquarters of the union was contacted and a list of 3,612 members was provided from a database along with a code for their respective institutions. Response rates on the initial trawl revealed a high rate of return at 49.13 per cent. Using a follow up procedure in an attempt to improve responses, the additional returns provided an overall response rate of 50.3 per cent ( $N = 415$ ).

#### *Key informants*

Structured interviews are currently ongoing and it is not possible to give a complete picture of the experiences of either personnel officers or trade union officials. However, the tone of their respective contributions is illustrated here. The interviews were structured around 37 points of discussion/question including: organisation culture, leadership style, conflict resolution, labour/management philosophy, policy, grievance, discipline, counselling and employee assistance programme provision, victims strategies, actions likely to constitute bullying and reasons for bullying behaviour. Several questions, not reported here, were not necessarily connected with bullying directly but merely serve to discover the nature of the employment relationship and to test a hypothesis of a possible link between human resource management and the reported rise of workplace bullying.

What is clear from the results is that personnel professionals suggest that bullying is not a widespread problem but recognise that it could emerge as one. Half of trade union respondents believe that it exists (this confirms estimates in NATFHE, 1994). Several personnel respondents reported that one or two cases emerging could result in several more as employees were reticent to bring the "first case" to personnel's attention. Counselling is not widely available according to either group (50 per cent of personnel officers and 36 per cent of union officers). Similarly, third party arbiters are largely unused according to union officers. In one organisation (further education), personnel did not wish to have formal counselling as they felt it might be perceived as "sweeping it under the carpet" rather than dealing with the problem at source. Furthermore, both groups suggested that there was no one person responsible to investigate claims of bullying or harassment. Both groups recognised that victims of bullying absent themselves and all can show reduced productivity. Again, both recognised bullying policy weaknesses, although this was markedly more noticeable among union responses. In terms of the reasons for bullying, all recognised the increasing pressure on public sector organisations and most felt that it was pressures on management which were in turn passed on as the main

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source for bullying behaviour. Trade union leaders felt that bullying had become more prevalent post incorporation as institutions faced increased financial controls. However, it was also generally believed that managers and institutional leaders “hid behind” such events and used them “like a smoke screen to hide behind managerial misdemeanours”. In one or two organisations the reasons given were a failure on the part of a new employee to fit in with the culture of the organisation – “they fail to recognise the way we do things around here”. As could be expected, opinion as to whether existing legislation was powerful enough to combat bullying differed widely between both parties. On whether policy hindered or helped combat bullying, 29 per cent of trade unionists felt it was a hindrance with one respondent feeling that it acted as “a strait-jacket” – that is; it attempted to pigeon-hole something which could not be neatly packaged.

In an attempt to identify what constitutes bullying behaviour, a list was produced based on published material to date (1998) from various authors. Personnel officers indicated that physical contact, isolation and non-cooperation, intimidation, victimisation as a result of a personal complaint, setting impossible deadlines/objectives and withholding information could all be actions which equate to bullying behaviour. By contrast; gossip, slander, posters and graffiti, offensive language and obscene gestures, undervaluing effort, removing areas of responsibility and replacing with menial tasks are all deemed to be harassment and not bullying. Trade union officers felt that all of the above factors would constitute bullying.

Both groups were also asked to indicate which factors could be reasons for bullying and those factors that were not. Personnel officers indicated that: being outspoken, over inquisitive, timid, vulnerable following prolonged sickness, sexual orientation, and knowledge of a personal indiscretion could all be reasons for bullying behaviour. Conversely, being successful, better qualified, more efficient, belonging to certain age groups, social background, superior social skills and being over enthusiastic were unlikely to be contributory factors. Again, trade union officials identified the majority of the factors as potential reasons for bullying behaviour. Overall, both personnel and union leaders felt that workplace bullying was not a fad and half of both groups felt it had not been over-represented in journals or the media.

The results above are not surprising given the strained relationships that have existed, particularly in further education since the advent of incorporation. Whilst there are some areas of commonality, there does appear to be a clear divide between both groups as to bullying behaviours and reasons for its occurrence. Although the interviews have revealed some interesting observations, they only provide one source of evidence and cannot give a complete picture, which is where the second element of the triangulation method can aid our understanding.

### **Postal survey**

The postal survey attempted to adopt a sociological perspective to examine the reasons for the emergence of workplace bullying in the 1990s and to discover

whether or not it is the phenomenon that some would have us believe. To this end it was decided that a broad spectrum of six abuse and discrimination issues/conflicts be investigated which would be representative of 1990s workplaces. These included: sexual harassment, racial harassment, sex discrimination, unfair promotion opportunities or reduced promotion opportunities. These allowed for direct comparison of peripheral issues with workplace bullying in five specific matrices. The matrices are:

- (1) where respondents had heard of them;
- (2) where they had read about them;
- (3) whether they had experienced or witnessed the issues;
- (4) whether they knew what contributed to them in an educational workplace situation; and
- (5) whether policies exist or should exist, along with whether trade unions should undertake further research in these areas.

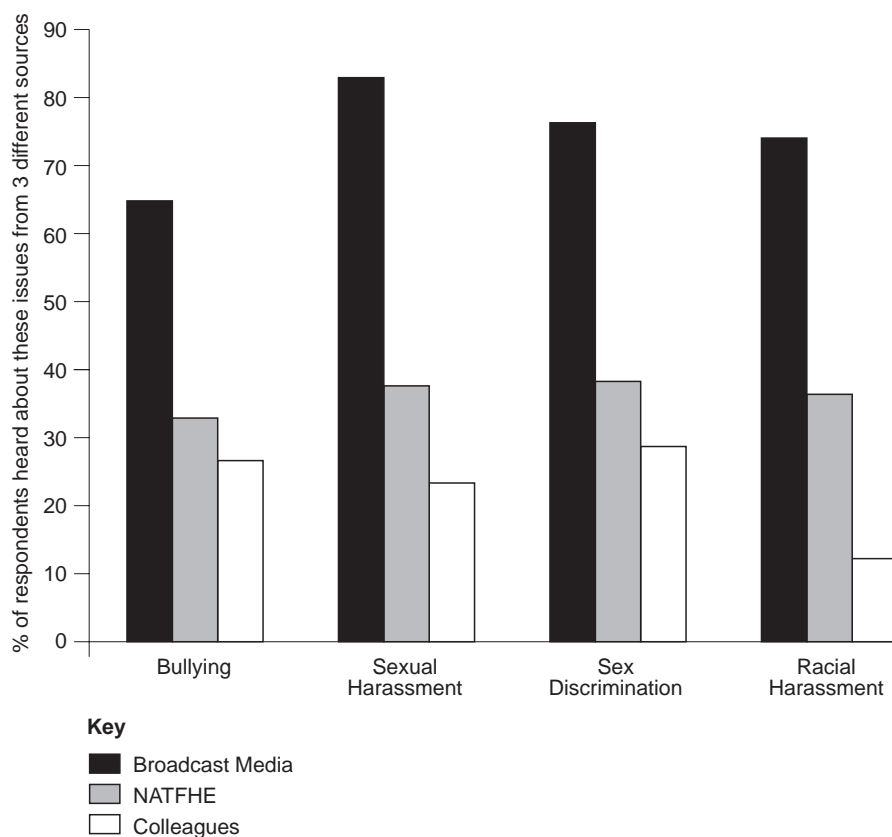
These approaches were adopted to discover how members of a trade union had become aware of them and whether or not their awareness or experience was directly linked to their exposure to both written and broadcast forms (i.e. I have read or heard about it therefore do I have greater experience of it?). The research also set out to discover whether certain internal and external forces – that is; funding, organisational values, management training and so on – would contribute to workplace experience of bullying, sexual harassment, discrimination and the other conflict issues.

In each case, bullying was listed alongside the other issues/conflicts of sex discrimination, sexual harassment, racial harassment, unfair promotion/recruitment and a lack of promotion/recruitment forming a horizontal axis. These were then cross-tabulated against the five matrices of read about, heard about and so on which form a vertical axis. In addition, variables were cross tabulated covering gender, age, full or part-time status, length of service, sector of employment (FE or HE), employment grade, non-educational employment experience, whether a trade union post was held and whether respondents had staff management responsibility.

#### *Where respondents had heard about bullying*

Respondents were asked to indicate whether they had heard about bullying from the broadcast media, from colleagues or from their trade union (NATFHE) with the aim of identifying potential influencing sources. Of these three sources, the broadcast media was ranked highest with 64.8 per cent of respondents indicating this was their primary source. NATFHE ranked second at 32.5 per cent and colleagues third with 26.3 per cent. Figure 1 indicates how bullying is heard about, compared with other workplace issues.

The figure shows that all four issues are predominantly heard about from the broadcast media. What was surprising was the speed with which bullying has become as well known as other issues such as sex discrimination and racial

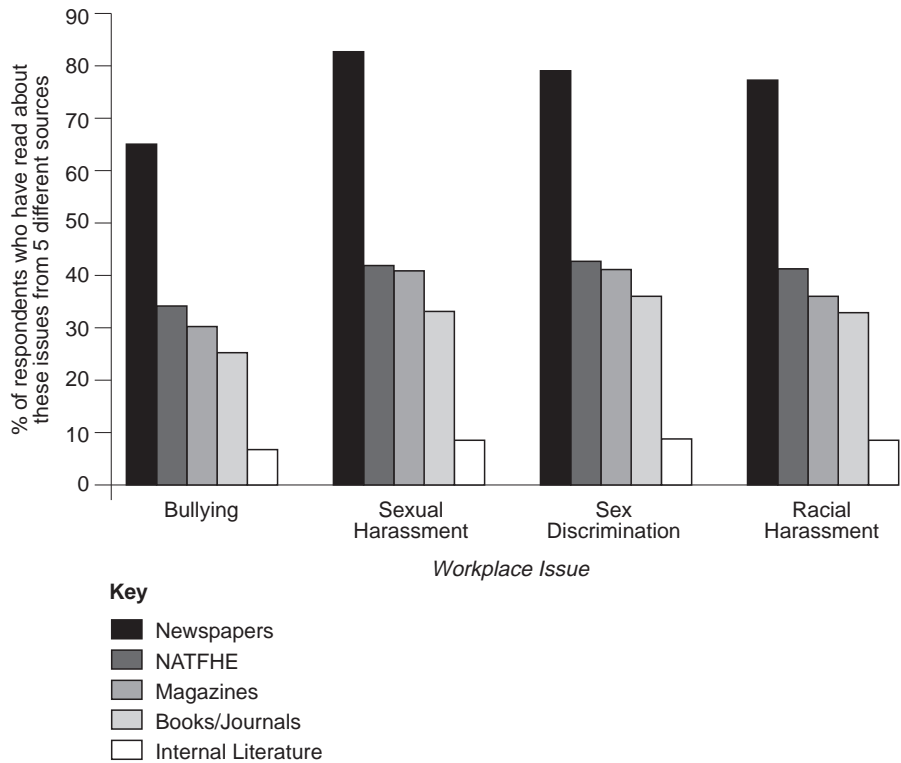


**Figure 1.**  
How bullying is heard  
about

harassment which have been in the workplace domain for some 25 years in UK terms. By contrast, fewer than 40 per cent of respondents had heard about any of the four conflicts from their trade union with bullying trailing last. This point is surprising, at least in part, given the proactive nature that trade unions have given to the other three more well-established conflicts. The bullying result from the trade union is unsurprising in view of its relatively recent appearance. Finally, in considering colleagues as a source, bullying ranks second to sex discrimination and ahead of sexual harassment.

*Where respondents had read about bullying*

Respondents were asked to indicate where they had read about bullying from sources such as: newspapers; books and journals; magazines and general reading; NATFHE literature and internal organisational literature. The most prevalent source was newspapers at 64.8 per cent followed by 33 per cent from NATFHE literature, 30 per cent from general sources and 25 per cent from books and journals. Only 7 per cent had read about bullying in internal literature. As can be seen in Figure 2, this pattern or hierarchy of sources also exists for the other fields. As with the “heard about” sources above, bullying is the least read



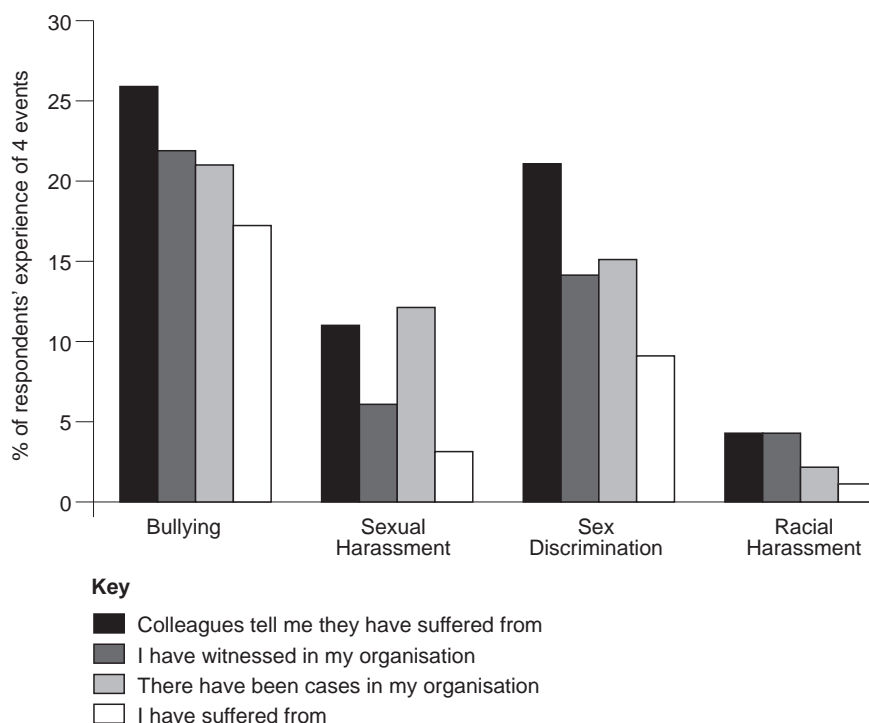
**Figure 2.**  
Hierarchy of sources

about by respondents but considering its relative recency, its fourth place ranking is not surprising. Again, as above, internal sources of information not only score poorly for bullying, but also for the other three fields occupying less than 10 per cent of respondents' "read about" information sources.

#### *Workplace experience of bullying*

Respondents were asked to tick their workplace experience of bullying based on whether they had suffered from an event, whether colleagues had told them they had suffered, if they had observed any events or whether there had been cases in their organisation. Frequency results for bullying revealed that 18 per cent indicated they had directly suffered, 25 per cent had been told by colleagues that they had been bullied, 22 per cent had witnessed bullying and 21 per cent indicated there had been cases of bullying in their organisation. Figure 3 illustrates the respondent's experience of bullying compared to their experience in the other three fields.

The results above clearly indicate that workplace experience of bullying is ranked higher than sex discrimination, sexual and racial harassment. In view of the earlier commentary where bullying is ranked fourth as the least read about or heard about could this suggest that such sources of potential information do not act as stimuli for either our own personal experiences or



**Figure 3.**  
Respondents' experience  
of bullying

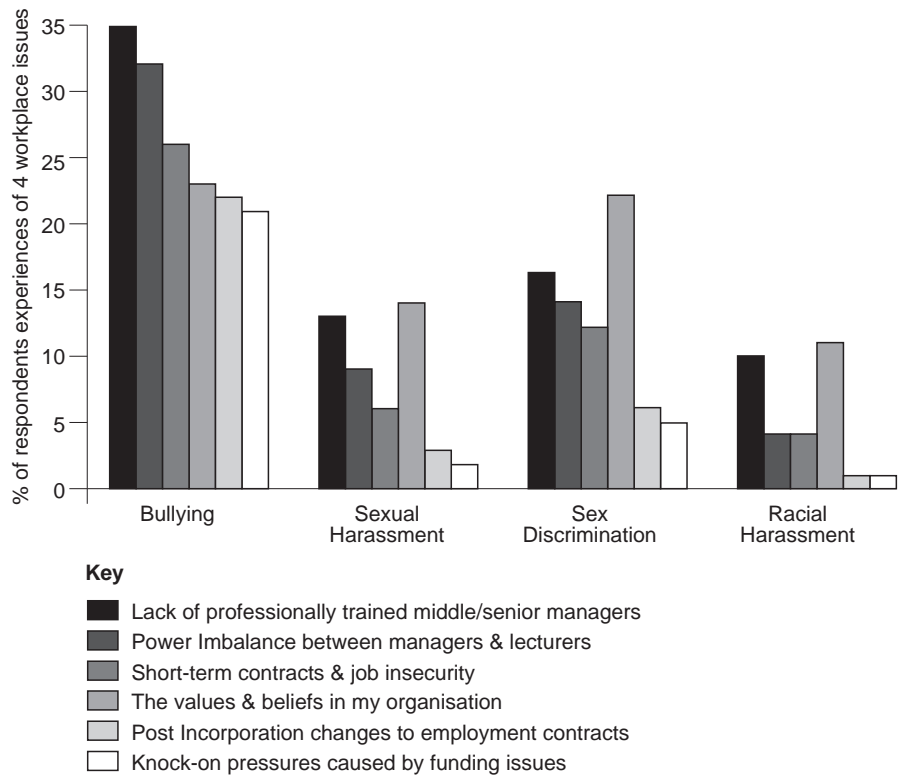
those of the people with whom we work. What is clear here is that bullying, however crystallised in the mind of the respondent, has been ranked as the most significant of the four events by some margin. It is also important to note that no definition of bullying was provided with the questionnaire.

#### *What events in the workplace contribute to these issues*

This section of the questionnaire posed six events that could be considered to contribute not only to bullying but also to the other issues. They were: short-term contracts and job insecurity; the organisation's values and beliefs; post-incorporation contractual changes; funding pressures; power imbalance between managers and academics and a lack of professionally trained managers. Frequency scores are revealed in Figure 4.

Figure 4 clearly shows that respondents believe that the six contributory factors are significant forces likely to impact on workplace bullying, the two most prominent features being a lack of professionally trained middle and senior managers and a power imbalance between managers and lecturers. Somewhat lower in the rankings came external factors such funding and post incorporation contract changes. Both internal and external factors such as these have also been frequently cited in the popular education, and trade union press as contributory factors.

Equally significant in Figure 4 is the ranking of bullying compared to the other three conflict issues where bullying is the dominant conflict of the four



**Figure 4.**  
Events contributing to  
bullying

presented by a clear margin. In most cases, more than twice as many respondents have indicated that bullying is affected by the contributory factors compared to the next closest conflict of sex discrimination. In view of its relative recency compared to sexual discrimination, this result is surprising although it could be argued that 25 years worth of awareness is likely to result in fewer managerial and organisational mistakes. It is also noteworthy when comparing bullying to discrimination that there is a widely held belief that discrimination in education (both race and sex) and, particularly higher education, is rife – see for example Heward (1996), Hornby and Shaw (1996). Such a conclusion may therefore suggest that bullying is more prevalent or more rife than discrimination.

The six contributory factors also reveal some interesting observations. Short-term contracts and job insecurity were ranked highest by younger respondents, by lower grades and upper grades (not middle grades) and by 40 per cent of trade union branch officials. Respondents who felt that organisational values and beliefs were contributory factors were generally aged under 50 years and/or were officials of the trade union. Post incorporation contractual changes were ranked highly by respondents with long-service, trade union officials, lower academic grades, a third of all respondents aged

31-50 and twice as many further education respondents to higher education respondents. Funding pressures were viewed as a contributory factor by lower academic grades, younger lecturers and again, trade union officers. The highest scoring factors of “power imbalance between managers and academics” and “lack of well trained senior and middle managers” were ranked highest by lower academic grades, younger lecturers, female respondents, further education lecturers, trade union officials. Notably, a third of staff who are graded on the “management spine” and therefore have a managerial role, ranked a lack of trained middle and senior managers as a contributory factor to bullying.

### *Interviews with victims/targets of bullying*

The third and final component of the triangulation method is the inclusion of witnesses’ case testimony. Here, individuals are interviewed without a set agenda in an attempt to discover how their perceived experiences can aid the understanding of the bullying conflict. What follows is a brief extract from one case study. The individual concerned is employed in higher education:

It got to the point that I didn’t go to any of his meetings for a whole year. The thought of meeting him used to give me migraines and pains across my chest. I built him up to be more frightening than he was. He also used to summon me on a Friday at 4 o’clock for a Monday morning meeting so I would worry about it all weekend.

Dr S learned to develop avoidance strategies and counter tactics:

In the early days I was very stupid and would meet him on my own, I have since learnt that he will lie and deny things that I know he had said. Nowadays I only see him as part of my subject team. Interestingly he is now on the defensive and we feel a little more in control.

I think I used to get bullied because I used to answer him back, now I just shut up for an hour. If I saw him in a corridor, I would walk the other way. I simply completely avoided him.

I had thought about taking a union person in with me but I was afraid he would say that I was being paranoid and that we got on really well and make me out to be a fool.

Qualitative investigations of victim/target meanings and experiences help complete the triangulation method but are included here simply to give readers some idea of the sorts of effects the phenomena which respondents perceived as bullying might have on their behaviour and quality of life.

### **Exegesis**

The limits of this paper prevent a detailed analysis of the five matrices referred to above – that is, where respondents have heard about, read about, witnessed these conflicts and so on. Therefore, the paper will focus on hearing and reading about bullying, factors likely to contribute to bullying and what impact these have on respondents’ experiences of them.

In broad terms, respondents who heard about bullying from either their trade union, the broadcast media or from colleagues, were also likely to have heard about the other conflict issues. Similarly, if respondents had heard about bullying from their trade union they would have also read about bullying from their trade union or in other written sources. Therefore, the source of reading or

hearing about bullying was largely not unique. This pattern appears to be repeated across the eight potential sources (union, colleagues, media, newspapers, magazines, organisational literature, journals etc.) that respondents could have heard or read about the four workplace conflicts.

This pattern of significance is largely unimportant and could be reasonably predicted. However, there are some results that are at least noteworthy and others that are interesting and will require further investigation. The research specifically sought to discover whether the source of hearing or reading about a conflict could have statistical significance for experience of that conflict, either personally, in conjunction with colleagues, through greater awareness or through observation. Looking at the sources of where a respondent could hear about bullying, there are three different findings. First, if the respondent had heard about bullying from the broadcast media, there was no statistically significant results for experience of bullying – that is, “I have read about bullying in the broadcast media but that has no significance on my own personal experience of bullying, on colleagues who have told me they suffer from bullying, on me witnessing bullying or on my belief that bullying exists in my organisation”. This pattern was also repeated for the other conflict issues. This in itself is interesting, as the broadcast media was the highest ranked source of hearing about bullying as shown in Figure 1.

Second, if a respondent had heard about bullying from their trade union (NATFHE), the level of significance changes. Here, respondents who had heard about bullying from NATFHE were also likely to have witnessed bullying, been told by colleagues they had suffered from bullying and finally believe it exists in their organisation. This was shown by a third of respondents (31-36 per cent). However, although this source of hearing about bullying as a conflict has some degree of association and significance, there was no significance between reading about bullying from the trade union and personal suffering from bullying. This therefore suggests that whilst the trade union has more significance than the media in terms of awareness and association, it does not appear to extend to the victims or targets of bullying.

Third, if bullying had been heard from colleagues (in general discussion not discussion with victims), then respondents were likely to follow the same pattern as the trade union as a source of hearing about bullying, that is, have witnessed, observed and believe it exists in their organisation. However, for the first time, respondents included that they had also suffered from bullying (34 per cent;  $N = 37$ ). Moreover, respondents also indicated that they had suffered from both sexual harassment (9 per cent;  $N = 10$ ) and sex discrimination (15 per cent;  $N = 16$ ) also. This suggests that where colleagues act as a prime source for hearing about bullying, they can act as initiators for victims/targets of bullying through possible awareness raising or recognition that they are not alone in suffering from this conflict. Additionally, discussion about one conflict appears to enable respondents to admit suffering from other conflict areas.

Turning to where respondents could read about bullying, we see a similar pattern developing as for the sources of where a respondent could hear about

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bullying. If respondents had read about bullying in newspapers, trade union literature, books and journals and internal literature they are also likely to witness bullying, believe it exists in their organisation, and have been told by colleagues who have suffered from bullying. None of these sources correlate with personal suffering from bullying.

By contrast where magazines are the source of reading about bullying, there is a strong significance with perceived suffering from bullying. This is also true for sexual harassment and sex discrimination. Additionally, the key-informant research above shows that organisations have yet to deal with bullying, which could account for a lack of correlation between bullying and internal literature. Moreover, the trade union, although dealing with bullying at policy level, is not transferring this effectively to grass-roots officer level – which could account for the lack of correlation between bullying and trade union literature.

This study has shown that 18 per cent ( $N = 73$ ) of respondents claim to have suffered from bullying and that poorly trained managers (35 per cent;  $N = 143$ ) are likely to be a factor that contributes to bullying. This figure rises to 62 per cent ( $N = 45$ ) of respondents who claim to have suffered from bullying. Similarly, incorporation is cited by 22 per cent ( $N = 90$ ) of respondents which rises to 45 per cent ( $N = 33$ ) of those who have also suffered from bullying. This suggests that respondents (who include a small number of NATFHE officials) see bullying as influenced both by organisational issues and by external pressures.

The key informant interviews provide evidence that bullying in further and higher education exists. The evidence being presented by several personnel officers (and some trade union officers) that bullying is due largely to external funding pressures is contradicted by the main responses from the postal sample where this factor was the lowest ranked of the six presented. It would be reasonable to expect that differences would exist as to the nature and extent of bullying yet there is common ground. The majority on both sides believes that bullying is not a “fad” and that they both needed to work towards a policy. Counselling for both perpetrator and victim appears to be at best sketchy with no provision for employee assistance programmes. Actions which constitute bullying and those which do not, differ significantly between both parties.

The evidence presented from the third element of the triangulation method, (although treated briefly in this paper), should not be overlooked. Existing UK literature is largely a matter of counting frequencies and identifying symptoms. By allowing people to “speak for themselves”, researchers are less likely to fall into the trap of imposing their own values and reactions on to this relatively new work-based conflict.

With the complex and varied means available to inform people of bullying, trade union influences are not as powerful a source as may be first perceived, although they have more influence than the popular press and broadcast media for this particular group. Speaking to fellow colleagues appears to enable some degree of consciousness raising which may suggest a more productive strategy

required to deal with the phenomena. Perhaps organisational self-help groups are a strategy that warrant examination by those involved in addressing workplace bullying.

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