

Workplace Bullying: The Perceptions of the Target, the  
Alleged Perpetrator and the HR Professional

Integrating Stakeholders' Voices to Improve Practice and  
Outcomes

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## **Abstract**

Through three exploratory studies encompassing different stakeholder perspectives, this thesis examines what happens when people complain about workplace bullying. In the first study, thirty one participants who had submitted formal complaints described a wide range of negative workplace behaviours as bullying, and all reported detrimental psychological and physical consequences as a result. Perceptions of unfairness was a major theme to emerge from the interviews, as was the importance of complainants validating their experience and obtaining justice through legal and other types of advocacy. Sixty-three per cent of complainants submitted a workers' compensation claim as a result of bullying and an accepted workers' compensation claim was viewed as validating their perception of the bullying.

Thirty accused bullies participated in the second study. Antecedents to the workplace bullying complaints were similar to those found in studies of bullied targets. Many participants viewed themselves as victims of bullying by their staff and others defended their behaviour as legitimate performance management techniques. The accused bullies reported negative psychological health outcomes in terms of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress and suicidal ideation, irrespective of whether they had been found guilty of bullying or not.

The third study examined the bullying complaint process from the perspective of the human resources' (HR) consultant, using focus groups. The main themes to emerge were the framing of bully complaints as conflicts, a push to manage bully complaints through conflict management and conciliatory processes and the lack of

follow-up after complaint resolution. These results are discussed in light of the negative perception of fairness that a conflict-management perspective could have for complainants who believe their bullying allegations have not been taken seriously by the organisation.

Overall, results highlight the subjective nature of the term *bullying* and suggest that a perception of injustice is central to an understanding of workplace bullying. The way that a bullying complaint is framed and managed by HR personnel can serve to exacerbate this sense of unfairness. These studies break the long tradition of primarily only listening to the victims' perspective in workplace bullying research.

## Declaration

This work contains no material that has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text of this thesis.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968. I also give permission for the digital version of my thesis to be made available on the web, via the University's digital research repository, the Library catalogue, the Australasian Digital Theses Program (ADTP) and also through web search engines.

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# **Chapter 1: Background and Scope of This Thesis**

## **1.1 Overview and Aims**

This thesis aims to examine workplace bullying in Australia from three perspectives: the perspective of the complainant, that is, the target of workplace bullying who has submitted a bullying complaint (study 1); the perspective of the perpetrator, that is, the alleged bully (study 2); and the perspective of the human resources' (HR) consultant who is tasked with preventing and managing workplace bullying at an organisational level (study 3).

The study of workplace bullying is not new and the research has moved from examining antecedents to bullying at work and prevalence rates, to look at 'best practice' methods of managing the problem. The studies in this thesis examine bullying from the Australian perspective and in Australia, between 400,000 and two million Australians are estimated to be bullied each year and between 2.5 and five million are bullied at some point in their careers (Queensland Government Workplace Bullying Taskforce, 2002). Bullying can result in serious psychological disorders including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and suicide (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2004; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002; Rayner, Hoel & Cooper, 2002; Vartia, 1996a; Zapf, Einarsen, Hoel & Vartia, 2003). While mental disorders such as these only make up six per cent of all workers' compensation claims, this category of claimants make up the longest time lost at work, averaging ten weeks of lost work days compared to the median time lost of four weeks for physical injury claims (Australian Occupational Health and Safety Compensation

Council, 2007). This makes workplace bullying not only a moral and humanitarian concern, but also a very expensive concern.

Although bullying research is well into its second decade, there have been few studies that have examined how complaints of workplace bullying are managed from a bullied target's perspective and why some targets file workers' compensation claims as a result of workplace bullying and others do not. Additionally, there have been few in-depth studies to date that have examined bullying behaviour from the perspective of the alleged bully. This means that the majority of the research and recommendations regarding workplace bullying are based on targets and to a lesser extent bystanders' or witnesses' accounts of workplace bullying. It has been recommended for a long time that this 'black hole' in bullying research be addressed (Rayner & Cooper, 2003). In addition to this recommendation, Fox and Stallworth (2009) more recently suggested that research should take into account the voice of *all* stakeholders and study bullying not only as it is experienced by the targets but also by the employment professionals to whom they turn. As research moves away from merely describing the phenomena, it becomes crucial to involve all stakeholders, including HR personnel who are charged with preventing and managing bullying in the workplace, in order to examine the challenges of managing bullying from an organisational perspective. To the author's knowledge, there have been very few studies that have examined the concerns that HR practitioners have in addressing workplace bullying complaints.

This thesis aims to explore these issues in-depth through three separate studies. Specifically, the first study will examine what sort of behaviours complainants are describing when they make a bullying complaint, the antecedents to

their complaints and what happens when they complain of bullying through their organisations' bullying grievance procedure. This study also examines the interrelationship between an employee's perception of organisational justice following a complaint of workplace bullying and whether this perception influenced their decision to lodge a workers' compensation claim for psychological injury as a result of bullying.

The second study in this thesis explores workplace bullying complaints through an in-depth analysis based on the perspective of the alleged perpetrator. To the writer's knowledge, an in-depth analysis of the perspective of accused bullies has not been carried out before. This study examines the antecedents to the workplace bullying complaint from the alleged perpetrators' perspective and explores the background of the bullying allegation from the alleged perpetrators' perspective, including what lead to the complaint against them. It also addresses the alleged perpetrators' perception of the investigation process and the consequences of being accused of workplace bullying.

The third study in this thesis aims to explore the challenges involved in addressing workplace bullying from the perspective of HR consultants with experience in managing workplace bullying complaints. Through a series of focus groups, the experiences of HR consultants are discussed, with an emphasis on what types of bullying behaviours are reported by complainants and in what way complaints of workplace bullying are managed in relation to the organisation's anti-bullying policy and complaint procedures. Further, the gaps in current anti-bullying policy and complaint procedures that are identified by HR professionals are discussed.



## 1.2 Workplace Bullying

### 1.2.1 Defining workplace bullying

While the term *workplace bullying* has become synonymous with inappropriate workplace behaviours, the study of workplace bullying has its roots in European and Scandinavian research into *mobbing*, in which Heinz Leymann (1996) initially studied aggressive behaviours in school children when groups or packs of children singled out individuals for hostile treatment. He defined this behaviour as follows:

A social interaction through which one individual is attacked by one or more individuals almost on a daily basis and for periods of many months, bringing that person into an almost helpless position, with potentially high risk of expulsion. (1996, p. 168)

Leymann termed this behaviour mobbing and later moved his research focus away from the schoolyard, to investigate similar behaviours in the workplace. The term mobbing is used more frequently in Scandinavian and German research and has been used to describe what is known in most English-speaking countries such as Britain and Australia as *bullying* with mobbing being more commonly used in Northern European countries (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf & Cooper, 2003).

As illustrated in Table 1.1, there are a number of terms to describe the construct we know in Australia as bullying. For example, the term bullying has been described as repeated negative behaviours that are directed at an employee or group of employees that harass, offend or negatively affect work tasks, in which the target/s end/s up in an inferior position (Einarsen, Zapf & Cooper, 2003). However, this description of bullying is very similar to a number of other constructs. For example,

*workplace harassment* is described as: Repeated activities, with the aim of bringing mental (but sometimes also physical pain and directed towards one or more individuals who for one reason or another are not able to defend themselves‘ (Bjorkqvist, Osterman & Hjelt-Back, 1994, pp. 173–74). In a similar manner, the construct of *workplace incivility* is described as: Low intensity deviant behaviour with ambiguous intent to harm the target in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect‘ (Andersson & Pearson, 1999, p. 457). The concept of *social undermining* is also very similar, with Duffy et al. (2002, p. 332) describing it as: Behaviour intended to hinder, over time, the ability to establish and maintain positive social relationships, work related success and favourable reputation‘. Again, a similar construct is described by *workplace victimisation*, where Aquino and Thau (2009, p. 718) describe workplace victimisation as occurring when an employee’s wellbeing is harmed by an act of aggression perpetrated by one or more members of the organisation ... when fundamental psychological and physiological needs are unmet or thwarted. Lastly, Tepper (2000, p. 178) defines *abusive supervision* as the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviours, excluding physical contact‘. These definitions and descriptions illustrate how the different constructs all describe very similar behaviours. They all describe unwelcome aggressive behaviours that are repeated over time and that have the potential to physically or psychologically harm the target.

The different terms used to describe bullying behaviours can contribute to considerable confusion for employees, practitioners, HR managers and researchers alike (Branch, 2008), as there is considerable confusion as to how workplace bullying is different to behaviours such as abusive supervision, social undermining,

harassment, incivility and other counterproductive workplace behaviours. One of the likely problems that this confusion creates is that employees label a number of workplace conflict situations as bullying, when in fact they may not be.

To add to the confusion about what we mean by bullying, there have been a number of meta-analyses of published studies undertaken in order to examine the large amount of data that is now available on workplace bullying. These studies have typically used information contained on the PsychINFO database to identify bullying articles. However, as identified by Bowling and Beehr (2006), a number of constructs are used in these with the results of the searches being linked to workplace bullying. For example, typical search terms used in the analysis of workplace bullying research include abuse, abusive supervision, aggression, bullying, harassment, incivility, interpersonal conflict, mistreatment, mobbing, petty tyranny and social undermining. This means that while the title of the published article might describe a meta-analysis of workplace harassment, for example, the study is actually made up of an investigation of a number of similar but different constructs such as abuse, abusive supervision, aggression, bullying, harassment, incivility and so on.

In Australia bullying is separated in a legal sense from other types of harassment or discrimination which have specific legal status under both State and federal anti-discrimination and sexual harassment legislation. Bullying, as ‘status blind harassment’ is covered Occupational Health and Safety (OHSW) legislation in South Australia, and OHSW regulations in other States. At the time of writing, the new national OHSW legalisation due to be proclaimed at the end of 2011, recognises bullying as an OHSW hazard that can contribute to psychological injury.

The literature on workplace bullying acknowledges that the definition and operationalisation of the construct needs to be approached with caution (Aquino & Thau, 2009; Branch, 2008; Einarsen et al., 2003) and debate remains between researchers as to whether the term *bullying* should be considered as an isolated category of extreme negative workplace behaviours, or whether it should be viewed as a continuum that begins with conflict and escalates into increasingly inappropriate behaviours and violence.

From within this conflict-escalation perspective, constructs such as incivility and aggressive workplace behaviour may still be considered as bullying, albeit in a different position in the bullying continuum, and physical violence can also be viewed as an extreme bullying behaviour. In the American literature, Counterproductive Work Behaviour (CWB) is considered an umbrella term that takes into account a number of similar constructs concerning harmful behaviours at work (Spector & Fox, 2010) that include behaviours that can be considered as workplace bullying. Notelaers, Birkeland and Einarsen (2010) argue that although *conflicts*, *aggression* and *bullying* may be seen as separate constructs, they are interwoven both theoretically and empirically and within this perspective are to be viewed as part of a bullying continuum. However, because of the uncertainty about where bullying starts and finishes in this continuum, the term *bullying*, when used generically, needs to be approached with caution because it is often not clear if it is being used in relation to interrelated concepts, or if it being used to describe a discrete type of behavioural pattern.

Table 1.1  
*Different Terms Used to Describe 'Bullying'*

<b>Constructs used</b>	<b>Authors</b>
Mobbing	Leymann, 1996
Bullying or Mobbing (terms used interchangeably)	Neidle, 1996 Rayner, 1997 Einarsen, 1999 Zapf & Goss, 2001 Cowie, Naylor, Rivers, Smith & Pereina, 2002 Coyne, Chong, Seigne & Randle, 2003 Hoel, Einersen & Cooper, 2003 Einersen, Hoel, Zapf & Cooper, 2003 Ferris, 2004 De Cuyper, Baillien & De Witt, 2009
Workplace Incivility	Lim, Cortina & Magley, 2008 Andersson & Pearson, 1999
Workplace Victimization	Aquino & Thau, 2009
Hostile Workplace Behaviour	Keashly & Jagatic, 2003
Occupational Violence	McCarthy, Mayhew Barker & Sheehan, 2003 Mayhew & McCarthy, 2005
Abusive Supervision	Tepper, 2000
Emotional Abuse	Keashly, 1998
Counterproductive Work Behaviour	Fox, Spector & Miles, 2001 Marcus & Schuler, 2004
Victimisation and Harassment	Einarsen & Rakens, 1997
Psychological Harassment	Salin, 2010
Workplace Violence	Hockley, 2002 Mayhew & McCarthy, 2005
Identity Threat	Aquino & Douglas, 2003
Social Undermining	Duffy, Ganster, Pagon, 2002 Duffy, Ganster, Shaw, Johnson, Pagon, 2006

In Australia there is currently no uniform legal definition of bullying, although this may change when the new OHSW legislation is proclaimed at the end of 2011. Currently workplace bullying is defined specifically in the South Australian occupational health and safety legislation, but is addressed and defined differently in each State. South Australia is the only State to date, that has bullying specifically

defined in the OHSW legislation, while other States and Territories have bullying written into the OHSW regulations, others have guidance notes and/or codes of practice that define bullying—again describing bullying slightly differently in each jurisdiction. While all the laws and guidance notes refer to repeated behaviours and unreasonable behaviour ... that creates a risk to health and safety in their definitions of bullying, as illustrated in Table 1.2, there are differences in the way workplace bullying is conceptualised within the legal definitions (Australian Productivity Commission Report on Occupational Health and Safety, 2010). For example, the Productivity Commission highlights that sexual harassment may be included in the definition of bullying in most states, but the Queensland code of practice clearly states that bullying does not include sexual harassment (which is covered separately under sexual-harassment legislation). Again, this highlights the confusion between the terms bullying and harassment. While most jurisdictions refer to bullying as psychological risk, the Tasmania guidance note specifies that the behaviour can include physical violence (Australian Productivity Commission Report on Occupational Health and Safety, 2010). This suggests that bullying is a physical health and safety concern as well as a psychological concern, again highlighting areas of potential confusion surrounding terminology and definition.

Table 1.2

*Definitions of Bullying Included in Australian Occupational Health and Safety Legislation, Guidance Notes and Codes of Practice. (Taken from the Productivity Commission Report on Occupational Health and Safety in Australia, chapter 13, p. 290.)*

NOTE:

This table is included on page 10 of the print copy of the thesis held in the University of Adelaide Library.

Despite the different definitions used to describe bullying, Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf and Cooper (2003) highlight the main concepts underlying the term *bullying*, which will be used throughout this thesis. They report that the following:

Bullying at work means harassing, offending, socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone's work tasks. In order for the label of bullying (or mobbing) to be applied to a particular activity, interaction or process it has to occur repeatedly and regularly (e.g., weekly) and over a period of time (e.g., about six months). Bullying is an escalating process in the course of which the person confronted ends up in an inferior position and becomes the target of systematic negative social acts. A conflict cannot be called bullying if the incident is an isolated event or if two parties of approximately equal strength are in conflict. (p. 35)

This definition describes specific characteristics of bullying that differentiate it from other types of inappropriate workplace behaviours. From within the framework of this definition, any *repeated* behaviours that negatively affect the target including sexual harassment, discrimination (i.e. racial discrimination) and physical violence are all captured under the framework of bullying. In light of this, the studies within this thesis have included behaviours such as sexual harassment and discrimination as actions that constitute workplace bullying.

### **1.2.2 Bullying versus workplace conflict**

As highlighted in the definition above, bullying is not a one-off negative behaviour or a conflict between two or more persons of equal status, power or influence. In order to be defined as bullying, the negative behaviour needs to be repeated. However, conflict need only occur on one occasion. Conflict can also be differentiated from bullying in terms of the power relationship between the parties. Conflict can occur between persons of equal power status and, at times, may benefit



an organisation through the debate of new ideas and development of innovative solutions (Caponecchia & Wyatt, 2009). This can be contrasted with bullying where a perpetrator is usually in a more dominant position than the target (by virtue of their personal characteristics or position within the workgroup) and the repeated behaviours directed towards the target place them in an even more inferior position, or harm them in some way.

Bullying is typically characterised by a process that starts off as low-level conflict, escalates to bullying and finally to stigmatisation and traumatisation of the weaker party—the target (Einarsen, 1999; Zapf & Gross, 2001). For example, in early studies, Leymann (1996) defined bullying/mobbing as a conflict that had a minimum duration of six months, but started with a critical incident or a specific conflict situation. Research shows workplace bullying can last longer than two years (Zapf et al., 2003) and that as the perpetrator becomes more powerful through their actions, the target is unable to defend themselves from the continuing negative acts they are subjected to (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996b; Zapf & Gross, 2001). Specifically, Zapf and Gross (2001) argue that ‘workplace bullying is an escalated conflict situation’ (p. 499).

However, the difficulty with placing bullying within this conflict-escalation framework is in knowing where the conflict ends and where the bullying begins. Further, the distinction between *dispute-related bullying* and *predatory bullying* (Einarsen, 1999) is seldom delineated in the literature. Instead, bullying is still being treated as unified phenomena, despite Einarsen (1999) drawing attention to the difference between dispute-related bullying and predatory bullying. There are some important distinctions between dispute-related bullying (as an escalated conflict) and

predatory bullying, because in the latter the target has done nothing provocative but is exploited because they are in a vulnerable position (Einarsen, 1999). In predatory bullying, there have been no prior conflicts between the two parties and the target is inadvertently placed in a situation where the bully purposely attacks them through exposure to inappropriate and harmful behaviours. Examples of predatory bullying include acting out prejudices against a target, scapegoating and highly authoritarian leadership styles. It may be important to distinguish between predatory bullying and dispute-related bullying when examining strategies to prevent and manage workplace bullying (for example, punitive measures versus conflict-management approaches in response to bullying complaints).

It appears that bullying is usually examined within a conflict-escalation model because a number of researchers have emphasised taking a conflict-management approach to addressing bullying (Hoel, Rayner & Cooper, 1999; Keashly & Nowell, 2003; Zapf & Gross, 2001). However, this approach to bullying has been challenged by others, who emphasise that bullying differentiates itself from conflict in a number of ways.

Even when examined within a conflict-escalation paradigm, there are four elements that make bullying different from workplace conflict per se. These are: frequency and duration of the behaviour; the reaction of the target; the balance of power and; the intent of the perpetrator (Hoel, Rayner & Cooper, 1999).

#### ***1.2.2.1 Frequency and duration of the behaviour***

While early anecdotal studies of workplace bullying reported that a single threatening act could be interpreted as bullying (Adams, 1992), most definitions are characterised by some degree of repetition. According to Einarsen et al. (2003),

bullying is normally not about single and isolated events, but rather about behaviours that are repeatedly and persistently directed towards one or more employees' (p. 7). Some authors, such as Leymann (1990, 1996), have suggested that the target must be exposed to the negative behaviour at least once a week for a period of at least six months for the behaviour to be labelled as bullying. While this criterion of six months has been used in a number of studies to differentiate work stress and victimisation from bullying (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2001; Vartia, 1996c; Zapf, Knorz & Kulla, 1996), such a stringent criterion has been criticised for being arbitrary (Einarsen et al., 2003).

Other researchers utilise different frequencies of behaviour in order to label the behaviour as bullying. For example, negative behaviour that has occurred now and then' or weekly' over the last six months has been used in a number of working definitions (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996a; Hoel & Cooper, 2000; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2007). Fox and Stallworth (2010) address this by only counting responses of ~~quite~~ "often" or ~~extremely often~~ "extremely often" when adding up scores in the bullying variables. However, the differences in how bullying is defined in regard to frequency and duration has led to a number of different prevalence rates being reported and to ongoing debate in the literature. The specific issues concerning prevalence rates will be discussed in section 1.2.6. However, despite this ongoing debate regarding prevalence rates and time frames, most researchers agree that bullying is not a one-off indiscretion, but is long-standing and the outcome of a series of often escalating negative interactions (Einarsen et al., 2003). For example, a number of researchers report that targets typically endure workplace bullying for more than 12 months before leaving the workplace (UNISON, 1977; Zapf et al., 2003). These studies

highlight the difference between bullying and conflicts and how the longevity of workplace bullying can contribute to occupational health, safety and welfare (OHSW) concerns.

### ***1.2.2.2 Reactions of the target***

In line with the longevity of bullying behaviours discussed above, Einarsen (1999) identified four escalating stages of bullying that have an increasing impact on the bullied target. These are aggressive behaviours, bullying, stigmatisation and severe trauma. While the initial aggressive behaviours are often subtle, it is not until the second phase that the conflict becomes bullying when the target realises that they are unable to defend themselves and the power differences between the perpetrator and the target become obvious. Exposure to bullying is classified as a significant source of stress at work (Zapf, 1999; Varita, 2001). When targets are bullied, many will seek management support, only to become stigmatised when they are blamed for their reactive behaviour if the perpetrator's accounts of the behaviour are accepted. During the next phase targets are openly humiliated, excluded or subjected to offensive remarks and comments, and they are powerless to do anything about it. In the final phase, according to Einarsen (1999), bully targets are exterminated—meaning they either leave the organisation or are forcibly expelled. Zapf and Gross (2001) examined a number of coping strategies used by bully targets. These included talking with the bullies, reporting the behaviour and fighting back with similar means. However, they reported that the most frequently recommended strategy for coping with bullying, and the only strategy that worked was for bully targets to leave the organisation.

One way that targets cope with workplace bullying is to retaliate against the bully (Lee & Brotheridge, 2006; Zapf and Gross, 2001), but the way targets retaliate often escalates the bullying, and Zapf and Gross (2001) found that the strategy of ‘fighting back’ made the situation significantly worse and had the potential to further isolate targets from their peers and support. Similarly, Lee and Brotheridge (2006) reported that some bully victims cope by retaliating with similar sorts of bullying behaviour. A key finding of these studies is that hostile acts from others are likely to be met with counter-aggression from targets. Targets of abusive supervisors often used passive–aggressive retaliatory behaviours such as ignoring the supervisor or working half-heartedly on tasks (Tepper, 2000). Again, this type of behaviour can be met with counter-aggression and may contribute to what Zapf and Goss (2001) refer to as *escalating conflict*. Studies suggest that the more confrontational or aggressive the response from the target is, the more likely the relationship between the target and perpetrator will escalate into a cycle of reciprocal aggression (Aquino & Thau, 2009).

Being a target of workplace bullying has also been found to be a strong predictor of bullying others (Hauge, Skogstad & Einarsen, 2009). In one of the few studies of bully perpetrators, Hauge et al. (2009) found that being exposed to bullying either occasionally or on a weekly basis both proved to be strong predictors of being a perpetrator of bullying, with an increasing probability of being a bully perpetrator as frequency of exposure to bullying intensified. These results support others that suggest that bully targets engage in retaliatory behaviours that are often similar to the behaviours that were carried out against them (Zapf and Gross, 2001) and suggest that, at times, the boundary between who the bully is and who the victim

is can sometimes be blurred. Similar results were found by Bowling and Beehr (2006), who found that negative reactions and behaviour towards the perpetrator occur when targets attribute responsibility for the behaviour to the perpetrator. However, they also suggested that as well as retaliating against the individual perpetrator, targets will retaliate against the organisation in response to the organisation letting the behaviour occur (Bowling & Beehr, 2006). From within this perspective, employees that are bullied are likely to retaliate through negative behaviours that are aimed at getting even with the perpetrator and the organisation.

Another common initial reaction of targets is to try to talk with the perpetrator, and this is something that a number of organisations continue to recommend in their workplace bullying policies and complainant procedures. Most workplace bully and harassment policies and complaint procedures in Australia recommend ‘self-help’ and talking directly to the alleged perpetrator as the first option for complainants. However, a number of studies have reported that this has the potential to increase victimisation and retaliation (Aquino, 2000; Hauge, Skogstad & Einarsen, 2009; Zapf & Gross, 2001).

A number of studies have found consistent relationships between being a target of workplace bullying and a large number of adverse psychological and physical health consequences. Health consequences, although recognised as a reaction of the target, will be discussed in section 1.2.7 of this thesis.

### ***1.2.2.3 A power imbalance exists between the target and perpetrator***

Several researchers have highlighted that bullying differentiates itself from normal conflict situations because of a power difference between target and perpetrator (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996a; Zapf et al., 2003). Unlike normal conflict

in which both parties are able to engage in a dispute on an equal footing, bullied targets are unable to retaliate. Einarsen and Skogstad (1996a) argue that 'to be a victim of bullying one must also feel inferiority on defending oneself in the actual situation' (p. 87). One of the reasons that bullied targets are usually the workers, and managers the perpetrators, is the inbuilt formal power structure of the workplace between employees and those in more senior positions (Salin, 2003). Indeed, in one of the largest bullying studies undertaken in the United Kingdom (UK), Hoel and Cooper (2000) found that managers and persons in higher formal positions, such as supervisors, were reported as perpetrators in 74.7 per cent of bullying incidences reported. However, given that participants were all union members and more likely to come from base grade positions, rather than management positions, this result is not surprising.

Informal power structures exist in most workplaces, with some employees having more power or influence because of their increased knowledge, experience or job security than others, or because they may be a man working in a male-dominated industry and therefore hold more power or influence than the minority of female workers. Other informal power structures may include race, gender, sexuality and age. One of the antecedents to workplace bullying has been found to be an organisational climate and leadership styles (Hoel & Salin, 2003) that allow employees with specific characteristics to be exploited. Predatory bullying can occur when these informal power structures are threatened (Einarsen, 2009; Einarsen, et al., 2003), for example, when a woman enters a previously male-dominated industry such as fire fighting or mining. In these cases, the target has done nothing wrong, but is bullied because of specific characteristics that make them less powerful within the organisation, and they

are seen as a threat by the dominant group or a specific person in the workgroup. Examples of this sort of bullying against targets whose characteristics have challenged group norms have led to a number of court cases in Australia where women were bullied when they did not fit into the social norms that were prized in male-dominated industries such as mining (for example, *Hopper v Mount Isa Mines Ltd*, Queensland Anti-Discrimination Tribunal, 1997). In a similar manner, sexualised workplace cultures that have been ‘normalised’ by team members have led to sexual harassment complaints by targets who have been harassed or bullied by the ‘in-group’ who wields considerable power (for example, *Horman v Distribution Group Ltd*, Federal Magistrates Court of Australia, 2001). Many perpetrators will only engage in bullying or harassing behaviours if the social or organisational environment of the workplace encourages such behaviour (Baillien & Witte, 2009; Prior & Fitzgerald, 2003; Zapf & Einarsen, 2003).

#### ***1.2.2.4 Intent of the perpetrator***

There is continuing debate as to whether bullying is an intentional act by the perpetrator or whether it is a subjective perception of intent to harm from the target’s perspective. Early research describes bullying as an intention or a perceived intention to harm (Einarsen, 1999) and some early studies suggest intent by claiming that bullying is the result of a psychopathic or tyrannical personality of the bully (Ashforth, 1994; Field, 1996). Other studies suggest that *some* bullying can be intentional, for example, in predatory bullying (Einarsen, 1999), where the perpetrator specifically targets the victim with the purpose to oust them from the organisation or ‘teach them a lesson’. In contrast, other types of bullying may not be intentional, for example, in dispute-related bullying. However, some researchers



specifically include the notion of intent and Aquino and Thau (2009) argue that: it is reasonable to classify a behaviour as aggressive if the target perceives some possibility that it was performed with the intent to harm (p. 719).

However, as with the definition of bullying itself, there is considerable debate over the issue of intent, and Hoel et al. (1999) argue that it is often impossible to verify the existence of intent in behaviours that are perceived by the target to be negative. For example, an employee might feel they are being bullied, even if the perpetrator has no intention of bullying them. What may be reasonable, although unpopular managerial practices, such as transferring an employee or managing poor work performance, may be perceived as bullying even if there is no intent. However, predatory bullying might be able to be distinguished from dispute-related bullying, where a dominant group or person (the bully) specifically targets a person with the intent to get rid of them or subject them to inappropriate behaviour that they know will harm them.

Although most of the research appears to conceptualise bullying as goal-directed behaviour, the data supporting the majority of these studies were gathered by victims where the intent to harm is in the eye of the beholder. In support of this, some studies have suggested that unpopular management decisions or work practices have been labelled as workplace bullying by employees (Liefvooghe & Mackenzie-Davey, 2003). These studies illustrate that many bullying practices that do not intentionally harm workers may be labelled as bullying, if the targets perceive them as unreasonable and unfair.

Due to the difficulty in determining intent, most definitions of bullying do not include intent as a requirement. Instead, a core component of bullying is said to be

the subjective perception made by the victim that these repeated acts are hostile, humiliating and intimidating’ (Einarson et al., 2003, p. 11). Therefore, as long as the *target perceives intent*, the behaviour can be labelled as bullying. Einarson and Raknes (1977) specifically outline that workplace bullying behaviours can be carried out either deliberately or unconsciously, but in either case cause humiliation, distress or offence to a target. From this perspective, the term *bullying*, rather than describing objective negative behaviours, can be seen as an expression of pain and suffering by the victim. This is very similar to some definitions of sexual harassment, where the perpetrator may not have intended to cause humiliation or embarrassment, but their sexually suggestive actions have contributed to a target feeling intimidated and harassed, and when examined objectively are deemed to be unreasonable or inappropriate in the circumstances.

Due to the difficulty in proving intent, and because a victim may feel harmed by unintended but nevertheless negative behaviours, intent is excluded from most of the definitions of bullying in Australia. Instead, the *reasonable person* test is used. This test contends that a reasonable person would expect the given behaviour to victimise, humiliate or threaten the target. This reasonable person test removes intent from the legislative requirements. From this perspective, the perpetrator may not intend to harm the target, but a reasonable person would view the perpetrator’s behaviour as inappropriate and likely to cause harm.

### **1.2.3 Bullying as an occupational health, safety and welfare concern**

While the primary focus of occupational health and safety was traditionally on physical workplace hazards and physical risks, the health impact of workplace psychological hazards such as bullying are becoming more apparent. This is partly

because of the increased costs associated with psychological injury caused by workplace hazards and the significant medical, legal, business and personal costs of psychological injury claims. From this perspective, bullying is viewed as an OHSW issue (Caponecchia & Wyatt, 2007; Dollard & Knott, 2004).

The acceptance of bullying as an OHSW issue has resulted in bullying being part of OHSW legislation in many parts of Australia. For example, the following definition of workplace bullying is included in section 55A(1) of the South Australian Occupational Health, Safety and Welfare Act 1986:

Workplace bullying means any behaviour that is repeated, systematic and directed towards an employee or group of employees that a reasonable person, having regard to the circumstances, would expect to victimise, humiliate, undermine or threaten and which creates a risk to health and safety.

While the annual number of new workers' compensation claims for physical injury in Australia decreased by 13 per cent between 1996 and '97 and 2003 and '04, psychological injury claims increased by 83 per cent. In 2004–05, the most common subcategories of psychological injury claims were work pressure (41 per cent of all mental-stress claims) and workplace harassment (22 per cent of all mental-stress claims). Both of these subcategories constitute behaviours that may fit with the spectrum of repeated negative workplace behaviours known as bullying. These claims had a median time lost from work of 9.7 weeks and a median direct cost of \$12,800—more than double the median time lost of four weeks and the median direct cost of \$5,800 for physical injury claims. Significantly, harassment claims had the greatest median time lost from work (11 working weeks) (Australian Occupational Health and Safety Compensation Council, 2007). These statistics are a

sobering reflection of the personal effects of workplace bullying and a reminder that workplace bullying is not just a moral issue but is very expensive. Psychological injuries as a result of workplace bullying continue to be a significant occupational risk in a number of organisations.

#### **1.2.4 Types of behaviours**

One of the fundamental difficulties in defining bullying is the differentiation between the behaviours themselves and the appraisal of the behaviour by the target (Agervold, 2007). While physical violence is much more common in schoolyard bullying, early studies into workplace bullying reported that it was very seldom found in bullying behaviour at work (Leymann, 1996; Zapf, Knorz & Kulla, 1996). For example, in an early study of Norwegian shipyard workers, where 88 per cent reported experiencing some form of bullying, only 2.4 per cent reported being exposed to physical violence (Einarsen & Raknes, 1997).

Another difference between schoolyard bullying and workplace bullying is that in the workplace, organisational policies, procedures and positional power can be used against workers (Grogan & Dann, 2002). This type of bullying has been labelled *organisational bullying* and refers to situations in which organisational practices and procedures humiliate, degrade and exploit employees, contributing to them feeling victimised by the organisation and the managers who implement such policies (Einarsen et al., 2003). In some organisations, bullying can become part of a management culture and some forms of bullying are justified by the organisation as normal management practices (Ferris, 2004; Ferris, Zinco, Brouer, Buckley & Harvey, 2007; Grogan & Dann, 2002; Rayner, 2000).

The introduction of new communication technologies into the workplace has also created new routes for workplace bullying, with e-mail, text messaging, twitter, Facebook and other media being used to target workers inappropriately (Baruch, 2005). A recent Australian study found that victims of cyber-bullying also experienced face-to-face bullying and the types of negative behaviours that were once exclusively carried out only face-to-face, such as withholding information or ordering someone to do work below their level of competence, are now also being carried out via modern technologies such as text messaging (or through excluding a target in a text-message loop) (Privitera & Campbell, 2009). While there has been significant research on the impact of these technologies on school bullying, these new means of bullying in the workplace have not been examined fully and the impact of workplace bullying through multimedia technology is still in its infancy.

A recent case in the Federal Court of Australia (*Poniatowska v Hickinbotham Homes*, FMC, 2009) exemplified the use of technology in bullying. Two employees of Hickinbotham Homes were found guilty of repeatedly sending lewd text messages and insulting e-mails to a fellow employee. The increase in modern communication technologies has the potential to change the face of workplace bullying, which now includes the victim being pursued through technologies that bridge the home/work domain.

As illustrated in Table 1.3 below, instruments to measure bullying tend to divide bullying behaviours into several discrete categories. These are behaviours that target an individual's work life (for example, failing to provide information that would let targets carry out their work, ignoring someone at work or removing key areas of responsibilities). Behaviours are also directed at the targets' personal domain

(such as spreading rumours, insulting or offensive personal remarks or inappropriate practical jokes) and behaviours that fall into the category of physical intimidation such as threats, or hostile remarks. The research suggests a high correlation between these different categories of bullying, with targets of workplace bullying reporting that they are subjected to a number of different categories of behaviour that bridge the work/personal domain (Zapf, et al., 2003). This means that rarely are targets just subjected to one type of bullying behaviour, but as the conflict escalates, they are subjected to a range of inappropriate and hostile behaviours that target not only their work life, but also personal life and in many cases threaten personal safety.

Most of the instruments that have been designed to measure bullying provide a list of negative behaviours and ask study participants to describe or mark the behaviours to which they have been exposed. One of the most popular and recently revised, is the Negative Acts Questionnaire—Revised (NAQ-R) (Einarsen, Hoel & Notelaers, 2009). The behaviours listed in Table 1.3, from the NAQ-R illustrate the types of workplace behaviours that are typically described by bully targets. While these behaviours described on the NAQ-R are probably the most common types of bullying behaviours, *any* repeated behaviours that offend, humiliate or threaten an individual (whether it is intended or not), can be interpreted as bullying by a target.

Table 1.3  
*Categories of Negative Behaviours That Encompass Bullying*

<b>Author</b>	<b>Categories of negative behaviours</b>
Leymann (1996)	Manipulation of the: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Victim's reputation</li> <li>2. Victim's possibilities of communicating with co-workers</li> <li>3. Victim's social relationships</li> <li>4. Quality of the victim's occupational and life situation</li> <li>5. Victim's health</li> </ol>
Zapf, Knorz and Kulla (1996)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Mobbing by organisational measures</li> <li>2. Social isolation</li> <li>3. Attacking the victims' attitudes</li> <li>4. Attacking the victims' private life</li> <li>5. Physical violence</li> <li>6. Verbal aggression</li> <li>7. Spreading rumours</li> </ol>
Einarsen and Raknes (1997)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Attacking the private person</li> <li>2. Social isolation</li> <li>3. Work-related measures</li> <li>4. Physical violence</li> </ol>
Einarsen and Hoel (2001)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Personal bullying</li> <li>2. Work-related bullying</li> </ol>
Einarsen, Hoel and Notelaers (2009)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Person-related bullying</li> <li>2. Work-related bullying</li> <li>3. Physical intimidation</li> </ol>

Table 1.4  
*Negative Acts That May Be Interpreted As Bullying (Taken from the NAQ-R, Einarsen et al., 2009)*

<b>Category</b>	<b>Bullying behaviour</b>
Work-related bullying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Someone withholding information that might affect your performance</li> <li>• Being ordered to do work below your level of competence</li> <li>• Having your opinion ignored</li> <li>• Being given tasks with unreasonable deadlines</li> <li>• Excessive monitoring of work</li> <li>• Exposure to an unmanageable workload</li> </ul>
Person-related bullying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being humiliated or ridiculed</li> <li>• Spreading gossip or rumours</li> <li>• Being ignored or excluded</li> <li>• Having insulting or offensive remarks made about you</li> <li>• Subjected to excessive sarcasm or teasing</li> <li>• Having allegations made against you</li> </ul>
Physically intimidating bullying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being shouted at</li> <li>• Being the target of spontaneous anger</li> <li>• Intimidating behaviours, such as shoving, blocking, finger pointing</li> <li>• Threats of violence or physical abuse</li> <li>• Actual physical abuse</li> </ul>

### 1.2.5 Employee interpretation of ‘bullying’

Adding further complexity to the debate into what bullying is, employee accounts of workplace bullying suggest that the term is used in a very different way than that defined in the literature. Employees categorise a number of negative workplace experiences under the wider umbrella of bullying (Lewis, Sheehan & Davies, 2008). Employee accounts of bullying have been found to describe a number of negative workplace interactions that do not necessarily describe *interpersonal* interactions, behaviours or conflicts, but a negative relationship with the wider



organisation. These include systemic concerns such as high unrealistic case loads, feeling continued pressure to perform, as well as other organisational systems or processes that negatively affect the way employees carry out their job (Lewis et al., 2008). Lewis and his colleagues (2008) report that employee labels of bullying include failures of an organisation to provide adequate staffing and implementation of practices sanctioned by the organisation that result in them feeling oppressed by the conditions in which they have to carry out their work. This wider interpretation of bullying, and use of the term *bullying* as a description of discontent is supported in research by Liefoghe and MacKenzie-Davy (2003, 2010), who found that employees did not limit themselves to a recognised definition of bullying, but called a number of organisational practices and conflicts bullying. This research is based on a number of qualitative case studies and focus groups. Using discourse analysis, the authors focused on how the term *bullying* is used in by employees in the organisations they studied. Their results challenge the definition of bullying used in the literature and they found that employees use the term *bullying* at a much higher frequency and as a broad term to describe a wide range of negative organisational practices that do not necessarily fit with the recognised definition.

This research found that while employees recognised the established definitions of bullying, they also labelled unpopular organisational practices and management decisions, such as appraisal systems and enforcing changes in contractual obligations, as bullying. This 'lay' interpretation of bullying has implications when allegations are made by workers who may be disgruntled with management decisions and organisational practices. This is an important contribution to the bullying debate because it draws attention away from the predominantly

personalised accounts of bullying that are emphasised in most of the literature and draws attention to the perceptions and impact of work practices and systems on employees as depersonalised forms of bullying within employment processes.

To add to the debate on how employees define and label bullying, the public's understanding of bullying is significantly influenced by the popular literature and the media that disseminates this information (Lewig & Dollard, 2001). The general or lay person's understanding of workplace bullying is influenced by popular books with emotive titles such as *Snakes in Suits: When Psychopaths Go to Work* (Babiak & Hare, 2006), and *Working with Monsters: Dealing with the Workplace Psychopath* (Clarke, 2005). These books pathologise the workplace bully, by labelling all bullies as psychopaths or sociopaths, providing descriptions of bully–psychopathic personality characteristics and in some cases providing diagnostic criteria so that readers can diagnose bullies/psychopaths at work. In doing this, these books ignore the organisational and social antecedents to bullying that have been established by more than a decade of research, and are discussed in section 1.2.8 in this thesis.

### **1.2.6 Prevalence rates**

Due to of the different conceptual definitions of bullying and the different ways of measuring bullying, there are diverse prevalence rates reported. Studies on the prevalence of workplace bullying have shown extensive variation both within and between countries (Nielsen, Stogstad, Matthiesen, Glaso, Aasland, Gotelaers & Einarsen, 2009), with the reported prevalence of workplace bullying varying from between 2 and 14 per cent depending on how it is measured (Nielsen et al., 2009).

Bullying prevalence is typically measured by either one of two methods: perceived exposure to bullying behaviours or perceived victimisation from bullying at work (Einarsen et al., 2003). Assessing prevalence rates through perceived exposure to bullying behaviours is carried out by providing an inventory of typical bullying behaviours such as the Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised (Einarsen et al., 2009), and asking the reader whether they have been exposed to at least one of these behaviours (Leymann, 1996) or two (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2001) described on the inventory on *at least* a weekly basis over the last six months. Using this method, Leymann (1996) estimated that 3.5 per cent of the Swedish workforce was bullied. However, this method has been criticised because utilising an operational definition such as this on its own does not take into account the subjective nature of the bullying and the perception of harm. For example, I might report that my manager has ignored my opinions, given me too much work to do and ordered me to do work below my level of confidence (all behaviours described on the Negative Acts Questionnaire) on a weekly basis, but I may not feel threatened or undermined by the behaviours, nor perceive them as bullying.

The second method provides an operational definition of bullying, such as work place bullying is the systematic and repeated exposure to ... and asks the reader whether they have been exposed to bullying as defined. In comparing these two methods, Salin (2001) found that the prevalence rate varied considerably depending on the way bullying behaviour was measured. For instance, when using an inventory of possible negative acts in the workplace, Salin (2001) found as many as 24 per cent of respondents reported that they had been subjected to at least one of the negative acts on a weekly basis; i.e. they were bullied. However, when provided with a general

definition of bullying, only 8.8 per cent of respondents considered that they were targets of bullying. Similarly, Agervold and Mikkelsen (2004) report that only 1.6 per cent of their respondents had been exposed to bullying behaviours on a daily or weekly basis, but when participants were provided with an operational definition of daily or weekly exposure of at least one negative act over the last six months, the frequency rose to 13 per cent (Agervold & Mikkelsen, 2004). Similarly, Mikkelesen and Einarsen (2001) reported that between two and four per cent of respondents in their study reported being victims of bullying, when bullying was defined as exposure to bullying behaviour for a period of at least six months. However, these prevalence rates rose to between 8 and 25 per cent when respondents were asked to indicate whether they had been exposed to a specific negative act (Mikkelesen & Einarsen, 2001).

In another study, Hoel and Cooper (2000) found that while only ten per cent of their respondents reported being victims of bullying, 38 per cent reported to have been exposed to at least one negative act weekly or daily over the last six months—again illustrating how different measurement methods produce different prevalence rates.

While there are no studies that report the prevalence of workplace bullying in the Australian workforce as a whole, there have been a number of state-based public-sector surveys that have indicated that the incidence of bullying is between 22 per cent in South Australia and 20 per cent in Western Australia. Similar figures were reported for Tasmanian public servants, where in 2005, 26 per cent believed they had been subject to harassment or bullying in the workplace over the previous 12 months (State of the Services Report, 2006–2007). The level of South Australian public

servants reporting that they had experienced bullying behaviour in 2004 remained the same as the 2003 level of 26 per cent.

While these results are very high, they measure workplace bullying by asking one very subjective question. Respondents were simply asked whether they thought they had been exposed to (or witnessed) bullying or *harassment* in a given time period. (They were asked: During the last 12 months have you experienced bullying or harassment in your workplace?)

In a review of 30 bullying studies, Zapf et al. (2003) found that between one and four per cent of employees experienced serious bullying, and between eight and ten per cent have experienced bullying at least weekly. However, up to 20 per cent of workers are occasionally exposed to negative social acts that do not fall under the stringent definition of bullying, but do expose the workers to intensive social stressors.

Nielsen et al. (2009) make the important point that studies that use longer reporting periods (i.e. whether participants have been bullied or exposed to negative acts over the past year, as compared to six months) probably yield a higher prevalence rate than an otherwise comparable study measuring bullying over a shorter period. They also make the point that few studies are based on representative samples and therefore the prevalence rates of bullying provided in the literature cannot be generalised to the wider population. Furthermore, prevalence rates are usually based on targets' reports of bullying and to a lesser extent witness or bystander reports and so are heavily biased by subjective interpretations of negative behaviours. Furthermore, they do not differentiate between conflicts that have escalated to bullying and predatory bullying.

Together these studies suggest that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to provide a general prevalence rate of workplace bullying, let alone prevalence rates for dispute-related bullying compared to predatory bullying, due to the difference in measurement, definitions and sampling techniques used in the research to date.

### **1.2.7 Consequences of exposure to workplace bullying**

As evidence of the validity of studying bullying from within an occupational health and safety perspective, a large body of research consistently documents the detrimental psychological and physical effects of workplace bullying.

Workplace bullying has been found to be associated with an increase in absenteeism with higher than normal levels of sick leave being one of the first signs of the distress of workplace bullying (Kivimaki, Elovainio & Vahtera, 2000). In an early study of the consequences of workplace bullying, Niedl (1996) reports that victims of bullying reported higher levels of anxiety, depression and psychosomatic complaints than non-victims. A number of studies since then have supported this finding and have shown that workplace bullying can have a harmful effect on a target's physical and mental health (Einarsen & Raknes, 1997; Hoel, Zapf & Cooper, 2002; Niedl, 1996; Vartia, 1996b; Zapf, Knorz & Kulla, 1996) along a continuum from increased risk of cardiovascular disease and depression (Kivimaki et al., 2003) to PTSD (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2004; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002; Nielsen, Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2008; Tehrani, 2004). In extreme cases, workplace bullying has also led to the target or victim committing suicide (Leymann, 1996). This extreme consequence of bullying was recently illustrated through a successful prosecution by Work Safe Victoria (The State of Victoria's Occupational Health and Safety Compliance Agency) following the suicide of a young waitress as a result of

predatory workplace bullying perpetrated by two of her colleagues, ignored by the café owner, who was aware of the treatment she was receiving.

Ylipaavalniemi and colleagues (2005) examined the association between psychosocial work characteristics and the incidence of newly diagnosed depression. They reported that the incidence of depression among employees who experienced workplace bullying was 1.58 times higher than persons who were working in teams with a positive working environment. After controlling for respondents who had a diagnosis of depression during the baseline questionnaire and also for lifestyle factors that might affect the outcome, there was still a significant association between poor work environment and newly diagnosed depression (Kivimaki et al., 2000; Ylipaavalniemi et al., 2005). Their research supports results of other studies that have found poor work conditions contribute to psychological distress, with workplace harassment emerging as an important determinant in mental health and depression, with severity of depression increasing as job stress increased (Mausner-Dorch & Eaton, 2000).

Tepper (2000) found that the relationship between abusive supervision and depression, anxiety, poor job satisfaction and emotional exhaustion was more pronounced for employees who had low compared to high job mobility. This meant that when targets believed they had no visible means of escape, the impact of the abuse was greater (Tepper, 2000).

The results of another study examining the health effects following bullying and sexual harassment found that both sexual harassment and workplace bullying were predictive of increased risk of future illness and injury over and above the effects of general job stress and other job variables such as psychological workload,

time pressure, conflicting demands and decision latitude (Rospenda, Richman, Ehmke & Zlatoper, 2005). Unfortunately, in this study, the measures of illness and injury were not ideal, as the authors only had a single item to measure self-reports of illness and injury. However, this study does support others in which a relationship between poor physical health and psychological health are found in workers who have been subjected to bullying behaviours. It also supported the findings of other studies in which the psychological effects of bullying are reported to continue long after the bullying has ceased (Leitner & Resch, 2005).

Lim and colleagues (2008) examined the impact of workplace incivility on work satisfaction and health outcomes. Workplace incivility is said to be a less severe form of bullying and therefore often goes unreported and is often dismissed as trivial conduct that does not warrant serious intervention (Lim, Cortina & Magley, 2008). However, despite this, Lim and colleagues (2008) found a number of similarities in terms of the consequences of incivility for employees who were targeted and those who also witnessed the behaviours. In line with workplace bullying, direct experiences of incivility were associated with lower work satisfaction, greater intentions to leave the organisation and poor mental health (Lim et al., 2008). Results also suggested that similar to bullying, the consequences of uncivil behaviour extended beyond the direct targets, to produce negative outcomes for employees who witnessed the behaviour and worked in the area.

Bowling and Beehr (2006) carried out a meta-analysis of all workplace harassment research and bullying that had been carried out between 1987 and 2005. Results indicated that harassment (bullying) was positively associated with anxiety,



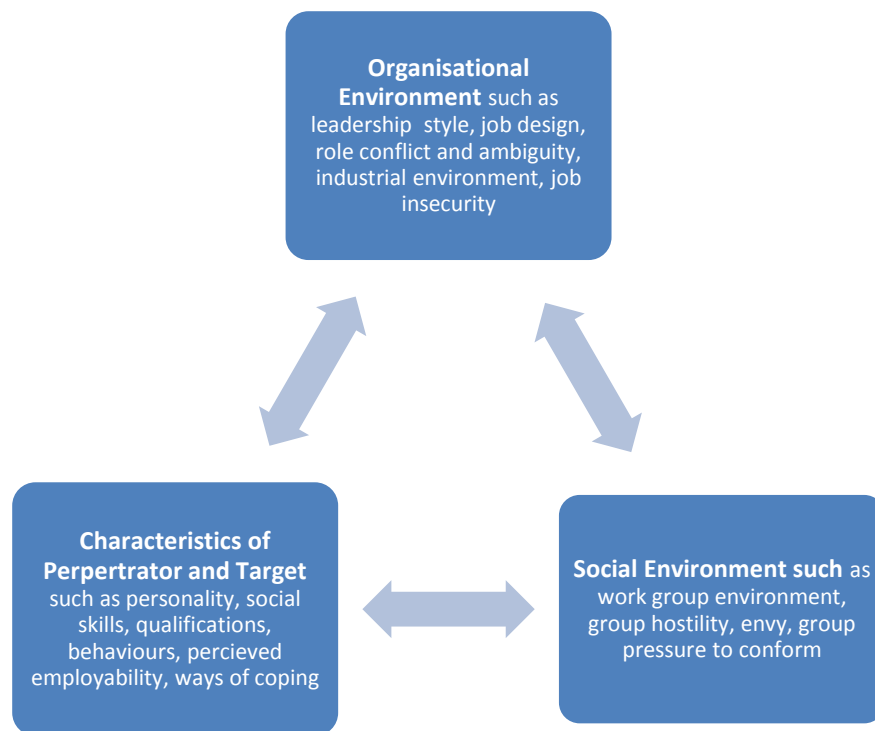
depression, burnout, frustration and physical symptoms and was negatively associated with positive emotions at work and self-esteem.

These human costs of bullying can have a significant effect on an organisation's bottom line. Increased absenteeism, staff turnover and reduced productivity as well as possible workers' compensation claims and other potential litigation (Hoel, Einarsen & Cooper, 2003) contribute to significant financial costs and are the economic reflections of human suffering from workplace bullying. A number of studies have also showed that the effects of workplace bullying impact not only the target, but also witnesses and onlookers (Hoel et al., 2003; Hoel, Faragher & Cooper, 2004; Rayner et al., 2002; UNISON, 1997). One cost assessment calculated by the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) estimated that workplace bullying costs Australian employers between \$6 and \$36 billion dollars every year when hidden and lost-opportunity costs are considered (AHRC, 2009).

### **1.2.8 Antecedents to workplace bullying**

The research suggests that workplace bullying develops from multiple causes that are related to both individual target and perpetrator characteristics such as the target's or perpetrator's personality (Vartia, 1996c), ways of coping (Baillien & Witte, 2009; Zapf, 1999; Zapf & Goss, 2001), target's position in the organisation's formal hierarchy (Aquino, 2000; Aquino et al., 2001; Hoel et al., 2001; Salin, 2001) as well as workplace characteristics (Einarsen, Raknes & Matthiesen, 1994; Knortz & Kulla, 1996; Hoel & Salin, 2003; Salin, 2008). In particular, a number of studies have emphasised the importance that the workplace environment has as a key factor in the development and maintenance of workplace bullying (Hauge, Skogstad & Einarsen, 2007, Agervold, 2009) As illustrated in Figure 1.1, the workplace

environment has been found to interact with the personal characteristics of perpetrators and targets and the social environment (Collinson, 1988; Robinson & O'Leary, 1998; Vartia, 1996c) to contribute to both the development and maintenance of bullying behaviours (Einarsen, 1999; Hoel & Salin, 2003, Zapf, 1999; Baillien & Witte, 2009; De Cuyper et al., 2009).



*Figure 1.1.* Factors that interact to contribute to the development and maintenance of workplace bullying.

### ***1.2.8.1 The organisational antecedents***

The information about the antecedents to workplace bullying has primarily been collected from victims' accounts of bullying (Zapf & Einarsen, 2003) and has

examined aspects of the organisational working and social environment that encourages bullying behaviour to occur from the victim's perspective. Two recent exceptions are studies by De Cuyper et al. (2009), and Hauge, Stogstad and Einarsen (2009) that also examined perpetrators' accounts of workplace bullying.

Bullying does not occur without a reason. It happens within a specific context where a perpetrator feels they need to exert their control (either intentionally or unintentionally) over a target. However, in order for this to occur there are several factors within the environment that contribute to this behaviour being able to occur. Organisational factors that contribute to bullying have been found to be the type of leadership within the work environment (Einarsen, Aasland & Skogstad, 2007; Tepper, 2000), job design and workplaces that have unclear goals, role conflict and ambiguity (Einarsen, Raknes & Matthiesen, 1994, Avergold, 2009), including lack of control over the work one does (Einarsen et al, 1994; Vartia, 1996; Zapf et al., 1996). In particular, role conflict and role ambiguity have been linked to workplace bullying (Einarsen et al., 1994; Hauge et al., 2007; Agervold & Mikkelsen, 2004). Studies have shown that both victims and observers of bullying are likely to report high levels of role conflict when there are perceptions of contradictory expectations, demands and goals (Einarsen et al., 1994). Similarly, bullying has been found to be closely related to poorly organised work environments with ambiguous roles and command structures (Einarsen et al., 1994; Leymann, 1996), especially during periods of organisational restructure (Avergold, 2009). From the perpetrator's perspective role conflict (Hauge et al., 2009), elevated levels of role stress and competing demands and expectations (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2007) were predicative of bullying.

Bowling & Beehr's (2006) meta-analysis of more than a decade of workplace bullying and harassment research indicated that bullying tends to occur in work environments where stressors such as role conflict and role ambiguity, role overload and lack of autonomy are present. Role conflict and ambiguity were the strongest predictors of workplace bullying in their analysis, with lack of control over one's work environment also being strongly associated with bullying at work (Bowling and Beehr, 2006).

#### ***1.2.8.2 The social environment***

Organisational social environment has been described as the assumptions, beliefs and values that members of the organisation come to share and take for granted (Schein, 1985). A work group environment can differentiate itself from the wider organisational environment and values, where attitudes and behaviours that may not be acceptable in the wider organisation may be established and are passed on to new members of the group. The difficulty that group members have in complaining about inappropriate behaviours within this group emphasises the potential strength of social processes that these group behaviours set up (Hoel & Salin, 2003). The way that bullying targets react to the group behaviour can further isolate them from the work group where the inappropriate behaviours are considered as the norm. Conflict with group norms has been found to be a significant cause of workplace bullying (Zapf & Einarsen, 2003), although Einarsen (1999) reported that predatory bullying often occurs in situations where the social group or a member of a dominant group will target a new group member because of their personal characteristics. Targets complaining about these norms or challenging them may become stigmatised and find it more difficult to become part of the group, exacerbating their isolation and

victimisation (Lewin & Peterson, 1999; Leymann, 1996). Zapf and Gross (2001) report escalation of conflicts when targets react against improper behaviours that are perpetrated by members of the work group. Indeed, being a target of workplace bullying oneself has been found to be predictive of involvement in bullying others (Hauge et al., 2009).

As reported earlier in section 1.2.3.3, examples of this sort of predatory bullying and aggression towards individuals who challenge established social norms have led to a number of court cases in Australia where women were bullied when they did not fit into the norms of male-dominated industries such as mining (for example, *Hopper v Mount Isa Mines Ltd*, Queensland Anti-Discrimination Tribunal, 1997). In a similar manner, sexualised workplace cultures that have been ‘normalised’ by team members, have led to sexual harassment complaints by women who have been targeted by a ‘dominant group’ that has normalised the sexualised environment within the workplace within the organisation (for example, *Horman v Distribution Group Ltd*, Federal Magistrates Court of Australia, 2001). Many perpetrators will only bully or harass others in the work group if the social environment of the work group encourages such behaviour (Baillien & Witte, 2009; Prior & Fitzgerald, 2003; Zapf & Einarsen, 2003).

### ***1.2.8.3 Target and perpetrator characteristics***

In discussing the target’s characteristics as antecedents to bullying, it is important not to blame the target, but to draw attention to the reason that they may be bullied by perpetrators. Some targets of bullying recognise that their personal characteristics may have placed them at risk of bullying due to the nature of the dominant group in which they are working (see previous section regarding the social

environment as an antecedent to bullying). Nonetheless, targets do not very often acknowledge that their own behaviour might have triggered the bullying (Zapf, 1999). Even so, a number of studies have identified that victims feel that their inability to stand up for themselves, their lack of coping resources, their shyness or poor conflict-management skills may have contributed to the bullying (Einarsen et al., 1994). In a study by Zapf (1999), some of the reasons given for bullying by victims were situated in their behaviours, personality or their own actions. Reasons that some targets believed they were bullied included their own poor performance, poor social skills, 'being difficult' or being too aggressive or moaning (Zapf, 1999). In another study, bully targets were found to be submissive, conflict avoidant, introverted, suspicious, sensitive, conscientious and conventional compared to a control group of non-victims (Coyne, Seigne & Randell, 2000). In this study, victims of bullying tended to be submissive, preferring to avoid conflict. They were more anxious, suspicious, submissive and non-controversial, introverted, reserved, traditional, organised and conventional compared to the non-victims. Coyne et al. (2000) highlight the distinction between the *provocative victim* who might invite bullying behaviour by provoking anger and retaliatory behaviours in others and those victims of predatory bullying who have done nothing to provoke an attack but may have personal characteristics or a personality that makes them vulnerable to bullying (Coyne et al., 2000). In support of this, Aquino and Byron (2002) found that group members who were perceived by others as overly dominating reported being more frequent targets of others' harmful actions than those who were perceived as moderately dominating. They argued that this was because high dominators were more likely to violate norms of courtesy and social deference, or to challenge others'

social identities by expressing differing views or opinions. Such behaviour made them vulnerable to retaliation in the form of victimisation (Aquino and Byron, 2002). Other studies have suggested those employees who are perceived as hostile, demanding or who have difficult personalities may be more likely to be targets of bullying from other employees within the organisation (Aquino et al., 1999; Duffy et al., 2006).

In a unique study examining the relationship between cognitive ability and counterproductive workplace behaviours, Dilchert, Ones, Davis and Rostow (2007) found that cognitive ability predicted the extent to which individuals engaged in both interpersonal deviance and organisational counterproductive workplace behaviours. While these two dimensions of counterproductive workplace behaviours were found to be quite distinct, individuals who carried out counterproductive workplace behaviours in one area also carried out similar behaviours in the other. It was suggested that poor cognitive abilities such as abstract reasoning, anticipating and self-monitoring one's behaviour contribute to individuals having difficulty foreseeing the consequences of their actions (Dilchert, Ones, Davis & Rostow, 2007).

However, the legitimacy of a *victim personality* as an explanation for bullying in general has been questioned in a number of studies (Hoel & Cooper, 2000; Zapf et al., 2003). Despite the findings that bully victims may exhibit specific personality types, Mattheiesen and Einarsen (2007) found that bullying victims were not a homogenous group. While a cluster of the victims tended to be less extravert, less agreeable, less conscientious and more emotionally unstable than the non-victims, 64 per cent of the victim sample did not differ from non-victims on these

dimensions (Glaso, Matthiesen, Nielsen & Einarsen, 2007). Matthiesen and Einarsen (2001a) advise against speaking of a *general victim personality*, as their study found that there appear to be various degrees of susceptibility to workplace bullying, with bullying targets coming from diverse personality configurations and reacting quite differently when exposed to interpersonal conflicts (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2001).

While the studies cited above suggest that some victims' characteristics may contribute to bullying, they are not a justification for the inappropriate behaviours perpetrated against them. Further, it is important to emphasise that the research shows that victims can only be targeted by bullies if the social group environment and the work environment are permissive to bullying occurring.

While there have only been a few scientific studies to date that have been carried out using bully perpetrators as participants, the literature presents a wide range of premises relating to the characteristics and personality of perpetrators. Some early studies have claimed that bullying is the result of a psychopathic or tyrannical personality of the bully (Ashforth, 1994; Field, 1996), and popular contemporary literature with titles such as *Snakes in Suits: When Psychopaths Go to Work* (Babiak & Hare, 2006) and *The Pocket Psycho* (Clarke, 2007) propagate a perception that all bullies have some sort of psychopathy or an undiagnosed personality disorder.

The scientific literature on the bullies' is meagre. A few studies have tried to ascertain the sorts of personalities that bullies might possess. For example, Parkins and his colleagues (2006) argue that individuals with a low ability to take the perspective of others are more likely to bully because they lack the ability to empathise with victims due to poor perspective taking. In their study, bullies were found to have higher scores on social dominance than non-bullies and low scores on



perspective taking than non-bullies (Parkins, Fishbein & Ritchey, 2006). However, this study has a number of flaws. Participants were undergraduate university students who completed a self-report questionnaire consisting of a number of personality scales. Participants were also asked their frequency of bullying others in their current workplace in the last six months. Given that only 50 per cent of the students worked more than 20 hours a week, many had not been employed for very long and most held only entry-level positions, the generalisability and validity of the results is questionable.

In a recent study, Cuyper, Baillien and De Witte (2009) measured perpetrators' reports of workplace bullying and found that job insecurity was associated with greater bullying behaviour. However, it was interesting to note that in their study the relationship between job insecurity and workplace bullying was stronger when perpetrators reported they had high levels of employability, as opposed to low. This suggests that perpetrators may be more likely to bully when the consequences of their bullying behaviour is low (i.e. if they are able to get another job if their employment is terminated). This study is one of the first that has examined bullying from the perspective of the perpetrators and it sheds light on the organisational factors associated with becoming a perpetrator, from the perpetrator's point of view.

The dearth of information from the bullies' arises in part because it is difficult to collect information from the perpetrators' themselves. As pointed out by De Cuyper and colleagues (2009), a significant concern in relation to perpetrator accounts of their behaviour is social desirability, which may prevent an accurate picture being provided by workplace bullies. However, one could argue that social

desirability also operates in victim accounts of workplace bullying and needs to be taken into account there too. Owing to the difficulties in gaining access to bully perpetrators willing to participate in research, there have been very few studies with bullies as the primary subject of investigation. In reality, the bullying literature and what we know about bullying to date is based predominantly on victim reports (and to a lesser extent bystander or witness reports). Therefore, the intentions, characteristics and attributions of bullies can only be assumed.

Despite the scarcity of research into the bullies, managers are reported to be the most frequent bully perpetrators (Rayner et al., 2002), and it has been recognised that bullying behaviours can be a deliberate means by some individuals to influence others to achieve personal and organisational goals (Ferris et al., 2007). This type of influencing through bullying has been described as a *see no evil* strategy in some organisations, where bullying behaviours are acceptable when the primary focus is on achieving targets and objectives. In these organisations, the focus is on the financial bottom line, and the ‘people needs’ are given a lesser priority (Ferris, 2004). Bullying in this light is seen as a legitimate managerial prerogative. Ferris and colleagues (2007) go so far to suggest the following:

Leader bullying represents strategically selected tactics of influence by leaders designed to convey a particular image and place targets in a submissive powerless position whereby they are more easily influenced and controlled in order to achieve personal and/or organisational objectives. (p. 197)

These causes of bullying of course overlap with the factors relevant to both the social group antecedents and organisational antecedents of workplace bullying discussed earlier and cannot be examined in isolation. From this perspective, the

perpetrator uses bullying as a deliberate organisational tool to achieve specific outcomes. The failure of a bullying leader to understand the target's perspective, rather, focusing on justifying their own behaviour, supports studies that have shown that perpetrator accounts of aggressive behaviour have regarded the response of the target as an unjustified over-reaction (Baumeister, Stillwell & Wotman, 1990).

There is increasing evidence that the leadership style is an important antecedent in workplace bullying. In particular, unpredictable leadership under which punishment is delivered according to the leader's own terms independent of the behaviour of subordinates has been found to be associated with both self-reported and observed bullying (Hoel, Glaso, Hetland, Cooper & Einarsen, 2009). In addition, laissez faire or slack leadership has been found in a number of studies to be predictive of workplace bullying (Einarsen et al., 1994; Hoel & Cooper, 2000; Hoel, et al., 2009) as this type of leadership style allows inappropriate behaviours to go unchecked, encouraging predatory bullying and allowing conflicts between staff to escalate to dispute-related bullying.

### **1.3 The Ethics of Conducting Sensitive Research**

Research that requires the participant to reflect on potentially distressing memories of workplace bullying is considered sensitive research in that the researcher is focusing on eliciting potentially traumatic experiences from research participants. Dixon-Smith and her colleagues (1996) draw attention to the many dilemmas that qualitative researchers face, including issues relating to maintaining boundaries and the degree of self-disclosure when conducting qualitative research of this nature. Due to these issues, undertaking qualitative research into sensitive topics poses many challenges for both the research participant and the researcher (Dixon-Smith, James,

Kippen & Liamputtong, 1996). In particular, researching workplace bullying may cause distress to research participants because the material itself is likely to be traumatic and the interviewer asking participants to recall possible distressing incidents has the real potential to re-traumatise them.

The researcher in the current study is a registered clinical psychologist and at times made a conscious decision to disclose her professional identity to research participants. She did this in order to enhance rapport with interviewees and acknowledge to them that she understood the mental health problems that they were disclosing and was able to manage the distress that they were displaying. This decision was also part of a reflexive process, which is discussed more in depth in section 1.3.2 of this thesis.

When participants displayed or reported distress during the interview they were provided with contact numbers for a nationwide helpline (Lifeline) and were encouraged to seek help through their general medical practitioner or treating mental health professional. One participant withdrew from the study following the interview because she reported being too distressed to continue. Another participant became very angry following the interview and while he completed his questionnaire, talked about having fantasies of shooting the HR manager and management staff at his workplace if his claim for workers' compensation was rejected for a second time. While his anger and revenge revelations were of significant research interest, they also posed a significant occupational health and safety risk and were therefore a noteworthy ethical dilemma for the researcher. In recognising the potential risks that this participant posed, the researcher obtained verbal permission from the participant to phone and speak with his treating psychiatrist and arrange an appointment. She

provided an opportunity for the participant to speak briefly with his psychiatrist, to confirm the appointment. She later debriefed with her research supervisor about the concerns that she had and the actions that she took. Both of these examples draw attention to the issues that can occur at times when conducting sensitive research of this nature.

### **1.3.1 Ethical considerations in the current research**

Given the sensitive nature of the studies in this thesis, informed consent was imperative. Ethics approval for all the studies contained within this thesis was given by the relevant committee at the University of Adelaide. Letters outlining ethics approval for all these studies can be found in Appendix C.

Participants in all studies were assured that they and their organisation would remain anonymous in the thesis and in any publications that resulted from the work. In order to safeguard the anonymity of subjects, all participants were given a pseudonym. Further, identifying features such as the participant's geographical location, organisation and professional details were removed from any quotations to protect their anonymity. Participants were informed that they were able to withdraw from the study at any time.

One participant in the bullies' study withdrew following the interview and declined to complete the questionnaire because of the distress that recounting her experiences caused. She was provided with a national helpline number (Lifeline) to call if she needed to talk to a counsellor about her experiences and was encouraged to get in touch with her treating doctor.

### 1.3.2 Reflexivity and the research process

As qualitative research is interpretive research, the investigator is more personally involved with research participants than is the case in large-scale quantitative studies. This increased level of intimacy introduces a number of ethical and personal issues that can influence the research process and the validity of results. It is not surprising, therefore, that a recurring theme within the qualitative research literature is the importance of *reflexivity* and, with this in mind, this section details the personal and ethical issues that arose for the current researcher during the course of her research, specifically with reference to the relationship between herself and the research participants.

Reflexivity has been called one of the pillars of critical qualitative-research methods (Jootun, McGhee & Marland, 2009) and refers to ‘the degree of influence that the researcher exerts, either intentionally or unintentionally on the findings’ (Jootun, McGhee & Marland, 2009 p. 42) including ‘the ways in which the researcher and the research process have shaped the data collected, including the role of prior assumptions and experience’ (Mays & Pope, 2006, p. 89). Therefore, taking into account the researcher’s preconceptions, experiences and the possible ways in which she has influenced the research process, including the collection and interpretation of the data, is one way of making certain there is reflexivity in the research process and that the validity of qualitative findings are ensured (Creswell, 2009; Mays & Pope, 2006).

The researcher entered the research process as an experienced clinical psychologist and mature student aged in her mid-40s. Some of the dilemmas she faced arose from the contrast between conducting research interviews as opposed to

therapeutic interviews, with which she was familiar and experienced. To assist the reflexive process, and as recommended by Mays and Pope (2006), she kept a research diary and recorded some of the questions and dilemmas she was experiencing prior to and during the data-collection and interpretation period. Appendices E and F outline some of the preliminary codes that were generated during the initial phase of data analysis and also note the researcher's thoughts, queries and dilemmas in relation to these emerging codes.

Pope and Mays (2006) highlight the importance of discussing the possible impacts of the researcher's personal and professional characteristics on the research, as part of the reflexive process. This is because the personal attributes of the researcher can impact on the 'distance' between the researcher and the research participants, can impact on the credibility of the findings and may pose ethical dilemmas for the researcher. In reflecting on this, two interrelated issues emerged for this researcher, which were the distinction between a research interview and a clinical interview and the distinction between herself as a researcher and herself as a therapist.

Prior to interviewing study participants as part of a reflexive process, the researcher noted the similarities and differences between the research interview and a clinical or therapeutic interview. She believed it was important to consciously distinguish between the two interview techniques so as not to influence the research through her experience as a therapist. These similarities and differences are illustrated in Table 1.5. While both a research interview and therapeutic interview may lead to change and a greater understanding or insight into the phenomena being discussed, the researcher noted that the emphasis is on *understanding* in the research interview and *change* in the therapeutic interview. She made a note that as a psychologist she

assisted clients in the process of change, but it was not her responsibility to influence change' in a research participant. However, she was also aware that it was her responsibility to ensure that research participants were no *worse* off after the research interview. This was addressed in relation to *duty of care* towards research participants, and she referred distressed participants to appropriate services for assistance if needed.

The researcher noted that there were elements of her professional identity as a psychologist that she was able to take advantage of in the research interview. Professional skills such as the ability to assist individuals to talk about sensitive topics, listening empathetically, non-judgementally, asking open and clarifying questions, are all professional counselling skills that empower individuals (whether they be research participants or clients) to tell their story. A number of the research participants (especially those in the Bullies' Study) talked about the research interview as the first opportunity they had to tell their story of how they came to be accused of bullying without feeling judged. This emphasised the difference between a research interview, where the objective is to allow research participants to tell their story, and an inquisitorial enquiry, where the aim is to investigate specific allegations. Many research participants reported having been through an inquisitorial enquiry or investigation, but had not talked to anyone about how the accusation impacted on them. It is possible that because the researcher had informed participants that she was a practising psychologist, they felt empowered to talk about the emotional impact of the allegations.

The professional identity of the researcher also posed some dilemmas. During the recruitment process, two potential participants (one in the bullies' study and one in



the complainants study) requested to see the researcher in her professional basis as a psychologist. She informed both of them that if they wanted to participate in the research then they could not see her in a professional capacity. One potential participant subsequently opted not to participate in the research for this reason.

Table 1.5  
*Similarities and Differences between Research Interview and Clinical Therapeutic Interview Noted in Reflective Diary*

<b>Similarities between therapeutic interview and research interview</b>	<b>Differences between therapeutic interview and research interview</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establishing ethical guidelines such as confidentiality and limits of confidentiality</li> <li>• Establishing rapport and credibility</li> <li>• Jointly constructing the conversation</li> <li>• Utilisation of ‘listening’ skills</li> <li>• Asking open questions to elicit response</li> <li>• Use of minimal encouragers such as ‘Go on’, ‘...’ and ‘?’</li> <li>• Asking participants to elaborate about a specific issue, for example, ‘Can you tell me more about that?’</li> <li>• Clarifying and checking accuracy of comments and interpretation</li> <li>• Managing the emotional components of participants’/clients’ stories</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being more directive in a research interview, in terms of drawing out information that <i>I want to know</i>, rather than information that may provide insight to a client</li> <li>• Not responding to emotion in a research interview in the same way I would in a therapeutic interview</li> <li>• In a research interview I did not challenge participants’ interpretations of events, as I might in a therapeutic interview or when conducting cognitive behavioural therapy</li> <li>• In a research interview my relationship with the participant is finished at the end of the interview, whereas in a clinical interview there is an ongoing relationship</li> <li>• *In a research interview the participant is helping me. In a clinical interview I am helping the client.</li> <li>• No collaborative problem solving in a research interview</li> </ul>

Another dilemma the researcher faced during the research process was the invitation by distressed clients to reverse the roles, so that she (as an experienced psychologist) would inadvertently become a help-provider rather than a (help-seeking) researcher (see \* in Table 1.5). She noted that she found this particularly difficult when participants expressed significant distress or anger, or reported retaliatory behaviours. In managing this dilemma the researcher made the decision that if the participant's presentation suggested that they were a threat to themselves or others, then she had a duty of care to provide assistance and provide the participant with a method of addressing their issue. In accordance with this duty of care, the researcher made a conscious decision at the end of one interview to ring the participant's psychiatrist (while the participant was still present) and make an appointment for the participant to see him. This was because she was of the opinion that the participant's level of heightened emotion and threats of retaliation were significant enough for her to actively seek help for him. Three other participants were provided the number of Lifeline—a national mental health support service.

The reflexive process described above helped the researcher to be aware of her own biases and the potential impact of her own personal and professional identity on the research process. While total detachment is an unrealistic aspiration (Jootun, McGhee & Marland, 2009), the reflexive process described above ensured that the boundaries between the researcher and research participants were deliberately acknowledged and taken into account during the research process.

## **1.4 Overview of Studies in This Thesis**

### **1.4.1 Overall research questions**

The three studies in this thesis aim to progress knowledge in regard to the experiences and complexities of complaining about bullying, by exploring what happens when a bullying complaint is lodged, from the perspective of all the stakeholders: the complainant, the perpetrator and the HR practitioner. By examining the subjective perceptions of all of these stakeholders and testing specific hypotheses, it is anticipated that the results from the three studies can be applied to produce a better understanding of the gaps in current policy and complaint procedures from the perspectives of all the stakeholders in regard to bullying complaints. The workplace bullying literature reviewed in the first chapter of this thesis has defined what we mean by bullying and has highlighted the antecedents, prevalence rates and effects bullying. It has also highlighted some of the ongoing tensions in the bullying research in relation to problems in defining bullying and measuring prevalence rates. Below is a short summary of each study in this thesis, highlighting the main additional literature that informs the specific research questions for each study. The research design of each study is also provided as a synopsis of how the results will be presented.

### **1.4.2 Approach and presentation of results**

An applied approach to the advancement of knowledge in the area of workplace bullying is emphasised within this thesis. This perspective is reflected in the focus on bully complainants (study 1), the accused bullies themselves (study 2) and the HR professionals who are charged with applying policy and procedure to

address complaints of workplace bullying (study 3). This perspective is also reflected in the mixed-methods design of the first two studies (the Complainants' Study and the Bullies' Study) that utilises both a qualitative and quantitative methodology to explore the research questions. The use of a mixed methodology allows an applied perspective on the research questions as the impact of the complaint processes and responses to bullying allegations are investigated.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis was used to guide the interviews in this thesis and to analyse the qualitative material. The thematic analysis used in these studies was driven by knowledge of previous bullying research, as well as the literature referred to at the beginning of this thesis and in the introduction of each study. The form of analysis used highlights themes and patterns across the data and endeavours to present the significance of these in relation to the experiences, meanings and realities of the study participants. This type of deductive form of analysis is especially suited to applied research (Pope, Ziebland & Mays, 2006). The themes identified in the current data are not necessarily dependent on quantifiable measures, but as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), are based on whether the data captures something important in relation to the overall data set. The themes were identified in relation to the number of participants who identified the theme across the entire data set, as opposed to each individual occurrence of the theme *within and across* each data set. Primarily, the themes in the current study were identified because they captured meaningful elements of the data set in relation to the overall research questions.

As recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006), the thematic analysis undertaken aimed to enquire beyond the semantic content of the data, to examine the

underlying ideas and beliefs that appear to shape or inform the semantic content: This type of analysis moves beyond simple description of the themes and aims to examine how these are interconnected and linked with the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Pope et al., 2006). This involves interpreting, rather than just describing the data and attempting to identify the significance of the patterns and their broader meanings and implications in relation to previous literature.

The research epistemology taken in these studies comes from an essentialist/realist approach where the meanings are given by the participants about their experiences, and it is these meanings that guide the qualitative aspects of this thesis. Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that from this perspective, the researcher can theorise motivations, experiences and meanings ... because a largely unidirectional relationship is assumed between meaning and experience and language' (p. 85). As recommended by Pope and Mays (2006), the qualitative results are triangulated with data from a more quantitative methodology in order to improve validity and draw attention to the similarities and contradictions in the findings. The specific method of analysing the data in the qualitative studies (the Complainants' Study and the Bullies' Study) is outlined in section 2.4.1 of this thesis.

#### ***1.4.2.1 Study 1—The complainants***

As highlighted in Chapter 1 of this thesis, the workplace bullying literature continues to debate the definition of the term *bullying* and the way that bullying is measured (Einarson, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003, Caponecchia & Wyatt, 2009). Further to this, a number of studies have indicated that employees label a range of situations as bullying, despite these situations not necessarily meeting the definition of bullying in terms of repeated behaviours that occur regularly over a period of

time.’ A review of the organisational justice literature is undertaken, and perceptions of fairness in the way workplace bullying complaints are managed are hypothesised to be a significant factor in the successful resolution of the complaint. With this in mind, a review of the literature suggests that perceptions of unfairness may also lead to retaliatory behaviours (Greenberg, 2004; Jones, 2007; Skarlicki & Folger, 1997) and that one of the reasons that employees make workers’ compensation claims may be because of a sense of unfairness in the way they were treated during the complaint-handling process.

Based on a review of the literature presented in Chapters 1 and 2, a mixed-methods approach will be undertaken to explore what happens when bully targets complain about bullying. Thirty-one participants were interviewed for this study and 44 participants completed a survey. Results of the thematic analysis of interviews will be presented in Chapter 3, followed by the results of the empirical analysis and tests of specific hypotheses in Chapter 4. These results are then interpreted together in the discussion section of the study in Chapter 5.

#### ***1.4.2.2 Study 2—The bullies***

In-depth research from the perspective of the workplace bully’ is scarce and information about bullies appears to be largely gleaned through the popular press and through books with titles such as *Snakes in Suits: When Psychopaths Go to Work* (Babiak & Hare, 2006) or *Working with Monsters, How to Identify and Protect Yourself from the Workplace Psychopath* (Clarke, 2005). These popular titles suggest that all bullies are predators, and their portrayal of bullies fails to take into account research that suggests that escalated conflicts can lead to bullying (i.e. there may be

responsibility for inappropriate behaviour on both sides), and that there are a number of organisational and environmental factors that contribute to workplace bullying.

The second study in this thesis is introduced in Chapter 6 and aims to address this gap in the bullying research by focusing exclusively on the bully perpetrator and eliciting the views, perceptions and attributions of the alleged bully. As with the first study, this study utilises both qualitative and quantitative methodology. Initially a thematic analysis will be undertaken following interviews with 24 participants who have been accused of workplace bullying. Thirty of the participants completed a survey. Results of the thematic analysis undertaken of the interviews will be presented in Chapter 8, followed by the results of the empirical analysis and tests of specific hypotheses in Chapter 9. These results will then be discussed in Chapter 10.

#### *1.4.2.3 Study 3—A human resources (HR) perspective*

Most Australian organisations now have workplace anti-bullying policies and complaint procedures. As discussed in Chapter 2, the literature suggests that when complainants use these procedures, they do not always fare well, and a number of studies have reported negative outcomes for employees who complain about bullying or harassment behaviours (Adams-Roy & Barling, 1998; Bergman, Langhout, Cortina, Fitzgerald & Palmieri, 2002).

Moreover, studies examining organisational responses to bullying complaints have found that organisations tend to focus on restorative measures as opposed to punitive measures to address complaints of bullying (Salin, 2009), and in doing so, potentially minimise complaints of bullying, framing them as ‘personality clashes’, conflicts over ‘poor performance’ or ‘strong management’ (Ferris, 2004). Few studies have examined the challenges that HR personnel face in addressing

complaints of workplace bullying, neither have they examined the gaps in workplace bullying policy and complainant procedures that have been identified by HR professionals. With this in mind, this study examines the experiences of HR personnel in responding to workplace bullying complaints. This study utilises a focus-group perspective and results from five separate focus groups will be reported in Chapter 13 and discussed in Chapter 14.

Finally, the overall results from these studies are integrated and discussed in Chapter 15, including the overall conclusions, strengths and weakness of the approach and recommendations for future research.



## **Chapter 2: Study 1—The Complainant**

### **2.1 Introduction**

#### **2.1.1 Complaining about bullying**

Despite the objectives of internal-grievance systems to quickly and positively address and resolve workplace bullying, there are a number of studies that report negative outcomes for workers who utilise internal-grievance procedures for perceived mistreatment in the workplace (Boswell & Olson-Buchanan, 2004; Cortina & Magley, 2003; Kivimaki et al., 2003; Klaas & DeNisi, 1989; Klaas, Henemann & Olson, 1991; Lewin & Peterson, 1999). This is because complainants are not always dealt with in the manner prescribed by the grievance policy and procedures. Cortina and Magley (2003) found that in many cases, the organisation may tangibly (through discharge, demotion or involuntary transfer) or subtly (through antisocial behaviour, blame or ostracism) retaliate against a person who has ‘blown the whistle’ on inappropriate organisational behaviour, such as bullying. Further, retaliatory behaviour may occur when the organisation feels that it could be vicariously liable for the actions of the wrongdoer if the complaint reaches the level of legal intervention (Cortina & Magley, 2003). Other studies have reported lowered performance ratings, a high level of absenteeism, lower rate of promotion and a high turnover in workers who have utilised grievance systems to report workplace bullying and harassment complaints (Boswell & Olson-Buchanan, 2004; Kivimaki, et al., 2003; Klaas & DeNisi, 1989; Klaas, et al., 1991; Lewin & Peterson, 1999).

The 2006 South Australian Public Service Workforce Perspective Survey reported that 22 per cent of South Australian public servants reported being bullied

or harassed during that year (South Australian Office of Public Employment, 2006); however, 39 per cent of those who reported being bullied or harassed said that they did not report the behaviour because of fear of victimisation, or because they were not confident that any good would come out of reporting it. Some of the individual responses are given below:

The repercussions would be worse than the problem and the issue would not be solved anyway.

I felt it would cause myself more stress if I did report it.

I confronted the behaviour and sought to control the situation as best I could.

I chose to leave the work place and commenced a new job.

I was too intimidated to report it.

Many others have raised reports but no relief has been provided.

The perpetrator is well regarded by my leader.

Males don't admit to feeling intimidated.

I thought I was going to be viewed as weak. (p. 53)

These responses reflect the concern that the public servants taking part in this survey had in reporting the bullying behaviours they were subjected to. The comments suggest apprehension about being seen as 'weak' if they reported the behaviour and their concerns that reporting the bullying would make the situation worse. It is interesting to note that reporting bullying behaviour was seen by one of the public servants as a feminine behaviour—again suggesting weakness if one was not able to address the behaviour on one's own. From this perspective, feeling 'intimidated' by the bullying and being unable to address the behaviour oneself was seen as a weakness the respondent did not want to admit to. The public servants also reported concerns of repercussions if they reported the behaviour and believed that

reporting it would be a waste of time, at best: ‘Many others have raised the problem but no relief has been provided’ and would give rise to retaliation, at worst ‘the repercussions would be worse than the problem’.

These comments reflect the general conclusion reached in related research that has examined the impact of complaining about workplace bullying and harassment. A number of studies have found that when targets report the bullying to management, they are blamed for the behaviour, with management often taking the side of the bully, minimising the target’s distress and seeing the situation as the perpetrator trying to manage a difficult employee (Einarsen et al., 1994; Leyman, 1990, Ferris, 2004). In an early study, Leymann (1996) reported that when management become involved in an ‘official’ bullying case within the organisation, the target’s account of the bullying is often discredited as managers and human resource personnel take the side of the perpetrator. This finding has been supported in more recent studies that draw attention to the increased marginalisation many employees who report bullying face, with the resulting increase in stigmatisation and eventual expulsion from the organisation (D’Cruz & Noronha, 2010; Ferris, 2004, Ferris et al., 2004;). In light of this, it may be problematic that the roles of supervisors and immediate superiors are strongly emphasised as primary intervention in most anti-bullying policy documents and particularly problematic when targets are encouraged to utilise line managers as a first point of contact as is often recommended.

Einarsen and Skogstad (1996b) and Zapf and Gross (2001) suggest that targets at times escalate conflicts themselves through inappropriate coping strategies. This may mean that the organisation, while addressing the bullying, may be trying to

also manage a target's retaliatory behaviour. As the behaviour of the target escalates, the organisation is forced to manage that behaviour in an increasingly self-protective manner.

However, the research examining the impact of grievance systems has produced inconsistent findings that have been difficult to interpret. Olson-Buchanan (1996) found that workers who filed grievances had higher job performance and lower turnover intentions than those workers who felt mistreated but did not file grievances. However, the design of this study poses a number of questions that cast doubt on the validity of the inquiry. Specifically, in his 1996 study, accomplices played the part of the managers and had prior training and instructions to treat all the study participants equitably. It may be argued that the lodging of a complaint against a manager or employee whose reactions are not controlled is more likely to show the same deleterious effect that has been reported in a number of other studies. Boswell and Olson-Buchanan (2004) report that negative outcomes generally attributed to lodging a grievance may be, in part, related to the mistreatment itself, as opposed to the grievance process.

A number of studies have found that most victims of harassment do not report their experiences, even when an organisation has the required policies and procedures in place (Bergman et al., 2002; Brooks & Perot, 1991; Marshall, 2005; Salin, 2009). Targets of sexual harassment who report the behaviour to management often do no better than those who do not report that they have been sexually harassed and in some cases do worse (Adams-Roy & Barling, 1998; Bergman et al., 2002). In their study of 28,500 military personnel, Bergman et al. (2002) found that reporting sexual harassment often contributed to greater job dissatisfaction and greater

psychological distress over and above the distress caused by the harassment. They found that the organisational responses to the reporting of the harassment had the potential to compound the problems through minimisation of the issue and a perceived lack of real commitment to deal with it. Complainants reported low levels of satisfaction with the way their complaint was handled by the organisation, which in itself contributed to poor health outcomes and decreased job satisfaction. Although this study was carried out in a military organisation and on sexual harassment complaints specifically, the results highlight how the organisational response to bullying and harassment may contribute to increased psychological distress for the target.

### **2.1.2 The importance of justice**

Organisational justice has been referred to as the 'just and fair manner in which organisations treat their employees' (Greenberg, 1990). The terms *fairness* and *justice* are used interchangeably within this thesis. An examination of the organisational justice literature indicates that the terms *justice* and *fairness* are often used interchangeably, although it appears that fairness is more often used to explain a generic construct, for example, the common expression 'that's not fair,' while justice is used in more specific descriptions or aspects of fairness such as *distributive*, *procedural* and *interpersonal justice*. For example, in their examination of perceptions of fairness, Cohen-Charash and Mueller (2007) utilised the Injustice Beliefs Scale (Smith et al., 1994), highlighting the similar way the two terms (justice and fairness) can be used interchangeably.

Since the perception of unfairness is a primary experience in workplace bullying, the concept of justice and, in particular, the perceptions of justice within a

complaint system, are expected to have a strong impact on how complainants cope with the behaviour they have been subjected to. An organisation that addresses a complaint of bullying in a fair manner may act as a buffer against the target's negative experiences and assist bullied workers to feel supported in their quest to have the behaviour stopped. In contrast, an organisation that does not address the complaint in a fair way may serve to increase the target's perceptions of injustice. By analysing bullying complaints through a justice perspective, this study aims to explore the importance of perceptions of justice within a complaint-handling system. It is hypothesised that perceptions of injustice will have significant ramifications. It is expected that perceptions of injustice will contribute to bully targets seeking justice through alternative methods such as seeking a legal remedy, or by making a complaint to a government jurisdiction external to the organisation or taking out a worker's compensation claim.

Evaluations of fairness have been mainly studied according to three aspects of justice. These are 1) distributive justice, 2) procedural justice and 3) interactional justice (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter & Ng, 2001). When relating these concepts to a workplace bullying complaint, distributive justice refers to the fairness of the specific decisions that are made in relation to the outcome of the complaint. Procedural justice refers to fairness in the *way* that the decision was made, for example, the transparency of the decision-making process, the ability of all parties to tell their side of the story and the ability of both parties to have equal representation. Interactional justice refers to perceptions of respect and sensitivity and is viewed in terms of the interactions between the decision makers and the complainant.

While the concepts of procedural justice and distributive justice have been supported in a number of studies, there is less agreement about the distinction between procedural justice and interactional justice, with some authors suggesting that interactional justice is a subset of procedural justice (Moorman, 1991; Niehoff & Moorman, 1993) and others suggesting that interactional justice should be broken down into two components: informational justice and interpersonal justice (Cohen-Charash and Spector, 2001; Colquitt, 2001; Colquitt et al., 2001; Greenberg, 1993). Colquitt (2001) argues that interactional justice is made up of two factors: 1) interpersonal justice, which relates to the respect and sincerity shown by the organisation; and 2) informational justice, which explains the extent to which procedures were honestly and adequately explained to workers. In support of interactional justice being an important concept of fairness, Roberts and Young (1997) found that workers who had challenged their compensation-claim outcome were most influenced by the quality of the interactions with the decision maker, suggesting that negative perception of interactional justice is a significant factor in employees challenging decisions that are made in an organisation.

Perceptions of procedural justice also influence an individual's response towards the decisions that are made in an organisation (Spector, Fox, Penney, Bruuresema, Goh & Kessler, 2006). Procedural justice has been associated to a greater extent than distributive justice with organisational commitment, organisational citizenship behaviours and productivity (Viswesvaran & Ones, 2002). However, levels of organisational citizenship behaviour (such as sportsmanship, civic virtue, altruism, conscientiousness and courtesy) have been predicted by measures of both distributive and procedural justice (Cohen-Charash & Spector,

2001) and there are no consistent findings in this area. Further, research has identified perceived unfairness as one important reason why employees carry out retaliatory behaviours in the workplace (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Cohen-Charash & Mueller, 2007).

The negative reaction of employees when their perception of justice is violated can be significant when they perceive unfairness in the way organisations have treated them (Bias & Tripp, 1996; Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Cohen-Charash & Mueller, 2007). Bias and Tripp (1996) found that individuals contemplate revenge and respond aggressively when organisational trust is violated and when the employee develops a negative evaluation of fairness within the organisation. Likewise, a number of other studies have supported the view that employees' evaluations of fairness within the organisation influence their attitudes, organisational citizenship behaviour (Moorman, 1991; Niehoff & Moorman, 1993), level of sick leave taken and general health (Elovainio, Kivimaki & Vahtera, 2002), including psychological distress (Surinen, M.Kivimaki, Elovainio & Virtanen, 2002) and depression (Ylipaavalniemi et al., 2005), as well as their decision to lodge workers' compensation claims following a workplace injury (Dollard, Winefield & Winefield, 1999; Roberts & Markel, 2001; Winefield, Saebel & Winefield, 2010). Therefore, the way that an organisation manages a complaint of workplace bullying can have significant consequences. Complaints of workplace bullying that are managed fairly may have significantly different consequences in terms of the complainants' health, their decision as to whether to lodge workers' compensation claims as well as their organisational commitment when compared with the



consequences of employees who perceive that their complaint of bullying has been managed unfairly.

### **2.1.3 Perceptions of organisational justice and psychological health**

While most studies of organisational justice have examined the different aspects of justice in organisations, such as the impact of procedural, distributive and interactional justice, a recent study found that the global perception of organisational justice significantly predicted employee health and burnout after one and two years. In this study, global perceptions of low organisational justice were found to be associated with poor employee health and burnout up to two years following the initial justice assessment (Liljegren & Kerstin, 2009). These results have been supported by the results of earlier studies and highlight the importance of fair treatment for employees. In one study that has examined the relationship between perceptions of organisational injustice and the psychological health of employees, Tepper (2001) found that employees' perceptions of justice accounted for significant unique variances in their psychological health. Further, the relationships between procedural justice and psychological distress were stronger when employees' perceptions of distributive justice were lower (Tepper, 2001). Furthermore, Tepper (2000) found that abusive supervision was associated with a range of negative psychological outcomes for targets including anxiety and burnout, but that these psychological outcomes were mediated by the targets' perceptions of injustice. These results have a number of implications for both management practices as well research into organisational justice. From a practical perspective, this study indicates that perceptions of organisational justice do have significant implications for the psychological well-being of employees. Tepper's (2000, 2001) findings are

important and suggest that bullied targets who perceive injustice following their complaint of bullying, may be more likely to have poor commitment to the organisation as well as increased health problems as a result of perceptions of injustice. Supporting this hypothesis, Elovainio, Kivimäki and Vahtera (2002) examined the relationship between levels of perceived justice and self-rated health, psychiatric disorders and recorded sick leave. They found that negative perceptions of organisational justice were associated with self-rated ill health and minor psychiatric disorders. Among the men in the study, low procedural justice was associated with an almost four-fold risk of minor psychiatric disorder, and the women in the study reported a two-fold risk of minor psychiatric disorders even when controlling for the other factors (Elovainio et al., 2002). These studies highlight the importance of organisational justice factors such as fair treatment and appreciation on employees' health, but also highlight the business impact of poor employee perceptions of justice.

Workers who make more favourable evaluations of organisational justice are also said to be more accepting of unfavourable management decisions (Tepper, 2001). It follows that organisations that intervene in workplace bullying complaints in the fair manner in which their policies and procedures promote, can obtain significant benefits in terms of increased organisational commitment from employees and less absenteeism from poor physical and psychological health. It is suggested that within the context of workplace bullying grievance procedures, if complainants perceive the management of their grievance was carried out in a fair and just manner, they may be more accepting of unfavourable findings.

#### **2.1.4 Perceptions of organisational justice and revenge behaviours**

A growing number of studies have examined how employees respond to perceived unfairness within an organisational decision-making process. A negative perception of procedural justice within teams has been reported to lead to increased absenteeism and less productivity within the team (Colquitt, Noe & Jackson, 2002), as well as Counterproductive Work Behaviour (CWB), such as aggression, interpersonal conflict, sabotage and theft (Fox, Spector & Mills, 2001). As well as revenge behaviours such as these, perceived injustice at work can contribute to uncooperative and counterproductive behaviours, so that employees who believe they are being treated unfairly avoid further exploitation. A recent study by Jones (2009) found that negative perceptions of informational and informational justice contributed to a significant amount of the variance in CWBs aimed at one's supervisor, and perceptions of low procedural justice contributed to the most significant amount of the variance in Counterproductive Work behaviours aimed at the organisation. Desires for revenge following perceptions of injustice explain, in part, why employees carry out CWBs (Jones, 2009). There is a growing body of research that suggests that revenge behaviours in the workplace are, more often than not, grounded in a perception that one has been the victim of undeserved harm and feelings of injustice (Jones, 2009; Tripp & Bies, 2010). This makes perceptions of justice a particularly important aspect when addressing allegations of workplace bullying, where a target of bullying already feels harmed by unfair treatment that they have been exposed to.

Revenge motives have been referred to as the psychological desire to inflict harm, while revenge behaviours have been defined as an individual's attempt to harm

a person or party that they blame for an offence (Stuckless & Goranson, 1992). This notion of harm includes the victims' intent to inflict damage, discomfort or punish in some way the parties they deem responsible for the unfair behaviour (Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2001). Revenge can therefore be expressed through negative retaliatory acts against the organisation or through personal retaliation against individuals perceived to be responsible for the wrongdoing. If the individuals who are perceived to be responsible for the wrongdoing represent the organisation, then the retaliatory behaviour may be aimed at both.

In particular, perceptions of procedural injustice have been found to be critical in shaping the responses of employees who believe they have been wronged and low levels of procedural justice are significant factors in an employee's subsequent revenge behaviours. For example, negative outcomes following unfair procedures have been found in a number of studies to be more stressful than relatively similar negative outcomes that have followed fair procedures (Greenberg, 2004; Aquino, Bias & Tripp, 2006). Skarlicki and Folger (1997) found that high levels of procedural fairness moderated employees' retaliatory tendencies when unfavourable decisions or outcomes were made. However, they also found that high levels of interactional justice helped moderate the effects of low procedural justice. Placed within the context of a bullying complaint investigation, this result implies that when the investigator shows adequate sensitivity, respect and concern towards the employees involved, those employees may be more willing to put up with procedures that they perceive as unfair; for example, being suspended during an interview. Conversely, it also suggests that perceptions of unfair procedures may

contribute to an increase in retaliatory behaviours, especially if the employee's perception of interpersonal justice is also low (Skarlicki & Folger, 1997).

When victims believe that the organisation will not punish offenders they will take the law into their own hands and take steps to punish the offenders themselves (Aquino, Tripp & Bies, 2006). These results have important connotations for employees who submit workplace bullying complaints. If HR personnel are able to create a climate that is high in interactional justice and is procedurally fair, bullying complainants may be less likely to use more adversarial grievance mechanisms, or engage in behaviour that is counterproductive to the needs of the organisation, for example, taking legal action, or submitting a grievance to an external jurisdiction or submitting a worker's compensation claim.

In a qualitative study of employees' revenge-seeking behaviours, Jones (2007) found that two-thirds of his sample had been the target of workplace bullying, and in all of these cases, the avengers reported that following a number of mistreatments, a single incident stood out in their mind as the straw that broke the camel's back. This incident contributed to the revenge motives and behaviours. Jones reported that employees in his study refrained from taking revenge up until this point because they believed that the perpetrator would get what was coming to them. However, there came a point in their interactions with the perpetrator when they no longer believed this was going to happen (Jones, 2007). From within this perspective, a complaint process that is deemed to be unfair or unjust may provide this *tipping point* where a bully target starts to believe that the perpetrator will not answer for their wrongdoings and therefore adopts retaliatory measures to right what they perceive is wrong.

Within the context of workplace bullying, this tipping point could occur at the time complainants believe their complaint is not being managed in a fair manner by the organisation. In response to the unfairness they perceive, complainants have the options of complaining outside the organisation to an external jurisdiction, taking legal action against the organisation or making a worker's compensation claim against an organisation in retaliation. All of these behaviours, while counterproductive to the organisation's needs, are the legal right of an aggrieved employee.

### **2.1.5 Perceptions of organisational justice and claiming workers' compensation**

In Australia, if a worker is injured at work they are able to make a claim for worker's compensation insurance for the leave required to recover from their workplace injury and for treatment expenses incurred as a result of the workplace injury. This sort of leave is commonly referred to as *stress leave* in relation to psychological injuries. Workers may apply for compensable leave and treatment costs for *psychological injury* if the workplace was the substantial cause of their injury. While mental disorders only make up six per cent of all workers' compensation claims, this category of claimants make up the longest time lost at work, averaging ten weeks of lost work days compared to the median of four weeks of time (Australian Occupational Health and Safety Compensation Council, 2007). This makes psychological injury claims as a result of workplace bullying very expensive in terms of both lost time and financial cost compared to physical injury claims.

A number of studies have found that the decision to lodge a worker's compensation claim following a workplace injury is influenced not only by the severity of the injury, but by the claimant's relationship with co-workers (Rosenman et al., 2000), as well as the organisation's response to the stressful incident (Dollard & Knott, 2004) and the claimant's perceptions of organisational justice (Roberts & Markel, 2001).

In a recent longitudinal study examining work satisfaction, Winefield and colleagues (2010) found that negative perceptions of organisational justice, in particular, the perceived unfairness of workplace policies and procedures governing workplace decision making, were predictors of claiming for psychological injury. Workers who felt helpless, who believed decisions were made unfairly and who believed they were treated without respect were more likely to make a claim for psychological injury than those workers who believed that they had been treated fairly by the organisation (Winefield et al., 2010). In a similar study, Haines, Williams and Carson (2004) found that individuals who lodged compensation claims reported significantly less organisational support than those who reported psychological injury due to workplace stress, but had not claimed worker's compensation. Between-group differences were also found in relation to the nature of the work environments with low levels of work involvement being reported by the compensation group (Haines, Williams & Carson, 2004). Such results could well indicate that a decision to lodge a worker's compensation claim may reflect lack of support from management and thus perceptions of unfairness in the way that management responded when they reported being bullied at work.

Other studies have found that the way the organisation responds to stressful workplace incidents or injuries significantly influences the decision of the injured worker to lodge a worker's compensation claim (Dollard et al., 1999; Roberts & Markel, 2001; Roberts & Young, 1997; Winefield et al., 2010).

In their study of workers who reported stressful incidents at work, Dollard et al. (1999) found that over half of the employees who took out work-stress claims following the incident reported a bad response from their manager with a quarter indicating that their manager's response was only average. Due to the negative stigma associated with filing a compensation claim, employees used a number of strategies, including taking other types of leave such as sick leave, holiday and long-service leave, before filing a claim. For example, in their study, Dollard et al. (1999) report the following:

One manager intimated to a worker that a compensation claim would mean the end of her career prospects. The worker concluded in retrospect that it would have been better to have taken sick leave. (p. 282)

This quotation illustrates the reluctance some workers have in regard to claiming workers' compensation entitlements and suggests that many injured employees only claim workers' compensation when they have nothing to lose, such as career or opportunities for promotion.

Similar attitudes to claiming workers' compensation were found in a recent study that examined employee perceptions of fairness in their decision to lodge workers' compensation claims for psychological injuries. In this study, perceived characteristics of the work environment, particularly perceptions of unfairness, differentiated those workers who lodged a worker's compensation claim from those



who did not (Winefield et al., 2010). It appears from these studies that for most employees, a stressful incident is only one factor in their decision to leave work or claim worker's compensation. A number of studies have found that the organisation's positive response to their grievance is a critical factor in their successful rehabilitation and return to work (Dollard et al., 1999; Haines, Williams & Carson, 2004; Roberts & Markel, 2001).

Roberts and Markel (2001) found that if managers treated injured employees with respect and consideration (i.e. high levels of interactional justice), they were less likely to file a worker's compensation claim. In contrast, employees were more likely to put in a worker's compensation claim when they perceived their interaction with the employer as unfair. There is also some evidence that employees will retaliate against employers or managers whom they perceive as behaving in an unfair manner towards them (Aquino, Bias & Tripp, 2006; Skarlicki & Folger, 1997). Putting in a worker's compensation claim may be seen as revenge or retaliation following unfair treatment because of the costs associated for the employer in relation to the claim.

In support of this, Rosenman and colleagues (2000) found that only 25 per cent of workers who had been diagnosed with a work-related musculoskeletal disorder actually filed a worker's compensation claim, despite injuring themselves at work. While severity of illness was the best predictor of filing a claim, lack of job satisfaction, poor perceptions of procedural justice, feeling unrespected at work, as well as perceptions that rewards were not distributed in accordance with job performance, were all associated with an increased likelihood of filing a worker's compensation claim (Rosenman et al., 2000). These findings support the proposition

that workers' perceptions of organisational justice will have some bearing on the outcome following a workplace injury resulting from workplace bullying.

While workers are able to lodge a compensation claim for psychological injury as a result of workplace bullying, there have been few studies that have examined the reasons why some targets of bullying lodge claims and others do not. Further, there have been no studies to date that have explored the impact of an organisation's response to an employee's grievance of workplace bullying and whether this response influences their decision to make a worker's compensation claim.

One of the aims of the first study in this thesis is to examine whether the organisation's response to the bullying complaint in terms of the complainant's perception of justice has impacted on their decision to lodge (or not lodge) a worker's compensation claim. I also aim to explore whether perceptions of injustice have led to any retaliatory behaviours, and if so, what kinds of retaliation.

### **2.1.6 Claiming workers compensation and organisational commitment**

Organisational Commitment (OC) has been conceptualised as the level of attachment that an employee feels towards the organisation in which they work, and the strength of the employee's identification with and involvement in a particular organisation (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982). Organisational Commitment has been differentiated from general job satisfaction in that it represents a more global construct relating to the organisation as a whole (Morrow, 1983). In contrast job satisfaction refers to an affective, response to the specific job or tasks that are carried out in the role the employee is performing.

One of the significant consequences of poor commitment to an organisation is employee turnover. Studies have found that high levels of organisational commitment have been associated with lower absenteeism and turnover (Cohen, 1993) and that workplace aggression has been found to be negatively associated with an employee's commitment to their organisation (Infante and Gordon, 1991). The literature is united in the findings that employees who are strongly committed to their organisation are less likely to leave the organisation (Allen and Meyer, 1990).

In a recent study, examining the effects of workplace bullying on Organisational Commitment, no significant relationship was found (Tengilimoglu, Mansur & Dziegielewski, 2010). However, Fulford's (2005) results suggested that levels of organisational commitment may be mediated through other variables, such as job satisfaction. In a study examining the relationship between organisational justice and organisational commitment in hospitality industry employees, Fulford (2005) reported that perceptions of poor organisational justice contributed to lower levels of organisational commitment. However, this was not a direct relationship. He found that perceptions of justice, did not directly influence levels of organisational commitment, but that employees of job satisfaction mediated the effects of justice perceptions to influence levels of organisational commitment.

In the current study it is hypothesised that participants, who submit a workers compensation claim, will report lower levels of both Organisational Justice, and Organisational Commitment. In particular, it is expected that participants who have submitted workers compensation claims will report low levels of affective or emotional attachment towards their organisation (Affective Commitment).

## **2.2 Method for Complainants' Study**

### **2.2.1 Introduction**

This section outlines the research methodology and commences by justifying the appropriateness of utilising a mixed-methods research design to address the research questions. I will argue that a mixed methodology and orientation towards combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches across all phases of the research process, will allow for a more in-depth study of the research questions than utilising a single-method design. The section then proceeds to discuss in detail the participants and scales utilised in the quantitative stage of the data collection as well as the way the qualitative data was analysed.

### **2.2.2 Justifying a mixed methodology**

Qualitative methodologies have had a long history with roots in cultural anthropology and American sociology (Cresswell, 2009). However, it has only been relatively recently that qualitative methods have been taken up by social and behavioural scientists (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998), in particular, by psychological research scientists. This increased use of qualitative methods may be due to the more rigorous analytic methods and rigorous guidelines that are now available to guide qualitative data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Due to this, qualitative methods are now utilised in a number of research areas and applied fields that were once delegated solely to the realm of quantitative enquiry (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

However, despite the increased use of qualitative methodologies, there is still a perception in some circles that qualitative research is a *soft science* and does not

carry with it the creditability or weight of statistical or empirically based research.

For example, Denzin and Lincoln (2005) suggest the following:

The challenges to qualitative research are many. Qualitative researchers are called journalists or soft scientists. Their work is termed unscientific, or only exploratory or subjective. It is called criticism and not theory, or is interpreted politically as a disguised version of Marxism or secular humanism. (p. 12)

For many researchers who are used to carrying out more empirical studies, the concept of qualitative research can appear to be insubstantial and not real research within the positivist scientific realm. While it is true that qualitative research cannot be subjected to the same rules as quantitative research, there are good reasons why qualitative methods may be utilised when one wants to investigate a small population in-depth and explore meanings, perceptions and attributions of research participants in relation to their lived experiences. This can be contrasted with quantitative research, that tends to focus on large populations and measure prevalence rates or shared experiences through standardised tests and statistical analysis that allow results to be generalised to large populations.

In terms of qualitative methods, there are a number of guidelines that provide procedures and methodologies that determine analytical rigor in data collection and analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These include sampling, data collection and data management, description of an analytic framework, as well as findings and discussion. The qualitative studies within this thesis were undertaken in accordance with these guidelines recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Pope and Mays (2006).

The thematic analyses undertaken in this thesis are grounded in *phenomenological epistemology*, which seeks to understand the everyday experiences of research participants in order to gain a better understanding of workplace bullying from their perspective and reality. Therefore, the analysis of the interview data focuses on the *individual lived experience* of bullying targets, which is important in applied research that is carried out from within this approach. Smith (1999) eloquently explains one of the reasons why I have chosen to use a qualitative methodology as part of the research design in this thesis:

Qualitative approaches are generally concerned with exploring, understanding and describing the personal and social experiences of participants and trying to capture the meanings particular phenomena hold for them ... Qualitative approaches are particularly useful when the topic under investigation is complex, dilemmatic, novel or under researched and when there is a concern with understanding processes, not measuring outcomes. (Smith, 1999, p. 417)

The complexity of workplace bullying in terms of the meanings given by both targets and perpetrators to behaviours that contribute to escalation of the conflict is something that has been missing in the predominantly quantitative and positivist tradition present in most workplace bullying research (for an overview of these studies, see Zapf et al., 2003). Most of this research has been conducted through large survey-driven studies in which results can be generalised across large populations. This research is important in identifying broad replicable patterns and providing consistency of findings in relation to the extent, antecedents and effects of workplace bullying. However, just as large empirical studies where validity in regard to generalisability is important, research aiming to more closely explore the

phenomenology or expression of a given lived experience is also necessary to advance research in a given area (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2008).

In line with this, there has been a call for more qualitative studies of workplace bullying (Fevre, Robinson, Jones & Lewis, 2010; Lewis, Sheehan & Davies, 2008), in order to examine more closely the experiences of targets exposed to workplace bullying. Specifically, Fevre and his colleagues (2010) note the following:

It might be more fruitful to adopt a qualitative or ethnographic approach in order to yield more information about contextual issues and explanations for workplace bullying in a particular setting. (p. 83)

While staying true to the qualitative approach that seeks to examine personal lived experience, the possibility of combining qualitative and quantitative research methodologies in one design means that we are able to incorporate the rich source of experiential information with some of the more empirical quantitative methods that are highly valued by the scientist practitioner. In accordance with this, Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) refer to pragmatically orientated researchers who utilise both qualitative and quantitative approaches and argue that in most areas in the social and behavioural sciences researchers are now utilising multiple methods of research as a matter of course, instead of relying on one method exclusively. A number of other researchers have challenged the use of basic dichotomies, and while each of the two schools has a different epistemological position, the strengths and weaknesses of both approaches provide a good rationale for their integration (Adamson, 2005; Cresswell, 2003). Furthermore, because all methods have imperfections in them, and their inherent strengths and weaknesses, they should not be seen as mutually

exclusive in terms of being able to provide meaningful answers to research questions.

Cresswell (2003) goes so far as to state the following:

Mixed methods research has come of age. To include only qualitative and qualitative methods falls short of the major approaches being used today in the social and human sciences. (p. 4)

Mixed-methods research can be defined as the use of quantitative and qualitative techniques together in either parallel or sequential phases (Adamson, 2005). There are increasingly recognised advantages of mixing both qualitative and quantitative data collection in a single study (Creswell, Clarke, Gutman & Hanson, 2003) and through all phases of the research process (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998).

Despite each method having differing theoretical underpinnings and different approaches to the nature of reality and how it can be examined, it appears that today, social scientists are less inclined to argue that one method should be used over another and are challenging such basic dichotomies. Rather, while each of the two schools has different epistemological positions, the strengths and weaknesses of both approaches provide a good rationale for their integration (Adamson, 2005; Creswell, 2003).

The use of mixed methods has been influenced by a number of factors, including the insights that qualitative data can provide that are not available through a purely quantitative research methodology. A mixed-method approach allows phenomena to be examined from different methodological viewpoints thus providing a more accurate measurement and interpretation. This type of approach can provide



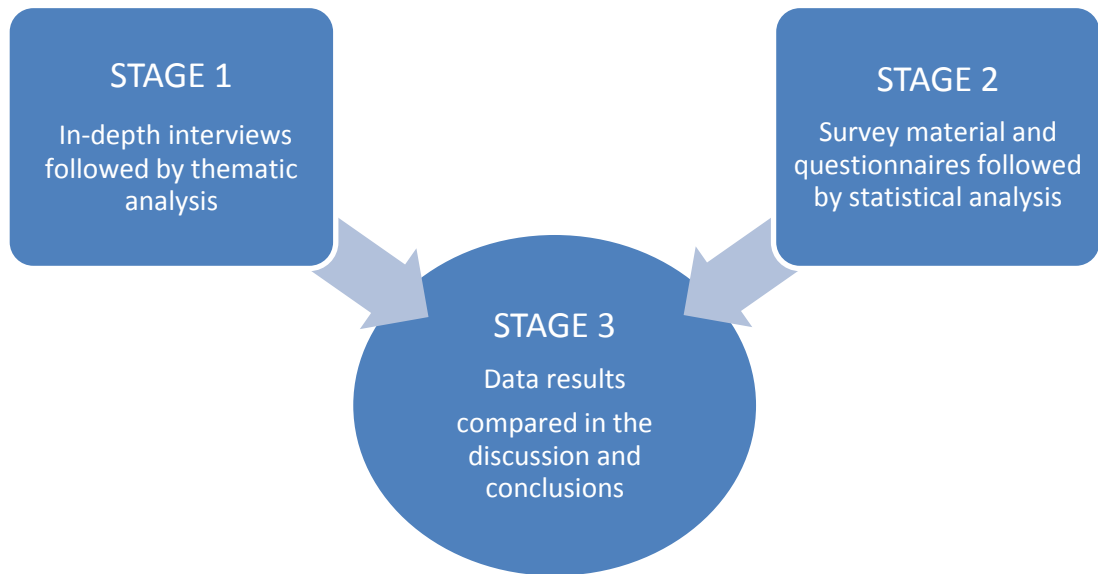
additional interpretation of the meanings and explanation behind empirical analyses of the same data.

Methodological triangulation describes the use of multiple methods to study a research problem and is one of the ways in which a mixed-methods design may be more valid than research that has limited itself to one method. While triangulation was originally a nautical term that described the use of two points and their corresponding angles to determine an unknown distance to a third point, triangulation techniques are now commonly used to validate or compare results of data analysis, especially in mixed-methods studies (Pope & Mays, 2006; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). Denzin (1998) outlined four different types of triangulation that can help validate qualitative studies. These are *data triangulation* (using a variety of sources for your data in the study); *investigator triangulation* (using different researchers to carry out the study or to check the data); *theory triangulation* (the use of different theoretical perspectives to explain the results of the study) and; *methodological triangulation* (using a number of different methods to study the research question). Comparable results using triangulation serve to substantiate the findings, while lack of convergence opens further research questions. The current study aims to use a number of different methods to examine workplace bullying.

Cresswell (2003) talks about a *sequential exploratory strategy* in mixed-methods research, which consists of two phases, the first being the qualitative data collection and analysis, which is followed by the quantitative data collection and analysis. The findings of these two phases are then integrated during an interpretation phase. The current study aims to utilise this approach and compare the findings made by these two data-collection methods.

### **2.2.3 Design of the Complainants' Study**

A mixed-method approach that involves the collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data (with the aim of triangulating observations and results) was chosen for this study. As the qualitative–quantitative distinction encompasses more than just a methodological distinction, Tashakkori and Teddle (1998) suggest that a mixed-model design may be better than a mixed-methods design. They argue that by mixing the design throughout the planning of the study, data-collection stage, data analysis and inference processes, the study can become rich in multiple sources of data with rich interpretation. Rather than only mixing methods, a mixed-model design starts with research hypotheses that are both confirmatory and exploratory. During the data-collection period, multiple sources of data, including open-ended interviews and surveys are utilised, and the interpretation of data is expanded, utilising the descriptive and narrative sources to explain the statistical results and vice versa (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). A concurrent triangulation design has been chosen for this study, which is illustrated diagrammatically below in Figure 2.1.



*Figure 2.1.* Concurrent triangulation design—adapted from Cresswell et al. (2003).

Since the first stage of this study is exploratory in nature, a qualitative design has been chosen in order to allow for thematic analysis of data gathered from semi-structured interviews. The second part of the study will be a between-groups<sup>4</sup> design in order to compare participants who lodged workplace injury (workers<sup>4</sup> compensation) claims as a result of workplace bullying/harassment and those who did not lodge workplace injury claims. Finally, the results gained through each method will be discussed in order to examine contributions of each data-collection method to the overall findings.

#### **2.2.4 Qualitative study: Research questions**

In the qualitative stage of this study, the research questions that guided the interviews are outlined below. The specific interview guide can be found in Appendix D.

1. What are the behaviours that are being labelled bullying by participants? Do these behaviours meet the definitions of bullying provided by the research? In what way are they similar and different?
2. Are there different types of bully victims? Can any of the interviews identify provocative behaviours as identified by Coyne et al., 2000?
3. Do any of the complainants describe predatory bullying as described by Einarsen, 1999?
4. What are the main antecedents to the workplace bullying complaint? Do complainants identify the same antecedents to bullying as those identified in the bullying literature?
5. Why did some complainants claim/or not claim for workers' compensation?
6. Is there a sequence of events that was common to all participants following the lodging of a complaint of workplace bullying?

#### **2.2.5 Quantitative study: Specific hypothesis to be tested**

The second stage of this study involved comparing data collected from a group of participants who had lodged workers' compensation claims for psychological injury as a result of bullying and another group that did not lodge workers' compensation claims following their bullying allegations. This stage of the Complainants' Study tests a number of specific hypotheses and it is anticipated that the results will build on the qualitative findings from the first stage. The specific hypotheses to be tested are listed below:

1. Participants who reported being subjected to higher rates of bullying are expected to report greater psychological distress in terms of higher

depression, anxiety and stress than those participants who reported low levels of bullying.

2. Participants who submitted a worker's compensation claim are expected to report more severe symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress than those participants who did not submit a worker's compensation claim.
3. Participants who submitted a worker's compensation claim are expected to report more negative acts carried out against them than those who did not submit a worker's compensation claim.
4. A significant negative relationship is expected between the number of negative acts participants report being exposed to and their organisational commitment.
5. Participants who report a higher frequency of bullying are expected to report lower perceptions of organisational justice and greater mental health problems compared with those participants who report a low frequency of bullying.
6. Participants who submitted a worker's compensation claim are expected to have a more negative evaluation of organisational justice than those participants who did not submit a worker's compensation claim.
7. Participants who lodged workers' compensation claims are expected to report significantly less commitment to their organisation.

### **2.3 Participants**

Forty-four participants were recruited for the study (17 males and 27 females). The age of participants ranged from 22 years of age to 78 years of age, with the median age being 50 years of age.

Six of the participants were recruited through WorkCover. WorkCover clients who were receiving workers' compensation as a result of workplace bullying were posted an information letter about the study and invited to contact the lead researcher if they were interested in participating. The letter of invitation can be found in Appendix A. However, the majority of participants (38) were recruited through a University of Adelaide media release and subsequent print, television and radio publicity related to the study. A copy of the media release can be found in Appendix B.

Thirty-three participants described themselves as workers. Eight participants said they were working in middle management and three described themselves as working in a senior-management role.

Thirty-six participants reported that they were on a workplace award or collective agreement, six reported that they were on an individual workplace agreement and two were unsure what type of workplace contract they were on.

Twenty-one participants were employed in either the state or federal public service. Fifteen were employed in the private sector and seven were employed in either the non-government or community service sector. One participant was an independent contractor employed by a board.

Twenty-one participants were currently working full-time and five were working part-time. Twelve participants were not currently working, but were receiving workers' compensation, and four were on a return-to-work program, working part-time. One participant described himself as unemployed and one as carrying out unpaid work.

### **2.3.1 Qualitative study—Participants interviewed**

Thirty-one of the participants described above were interviewed as part of the qualitative part of the study and 29 of the interviews were analysed. Three of the interviews were unable to be utilised because the tape recorder had unwittingly stopped during the interview or the recording was inaudible because of background noise or static. Therefore, 29 interviews were used in the qualitative analysis.

Most participants were interviewed at the University of Adelaide. Four participants requested and therefore were interviewed in their homes and three were interviewed by telephone because of geographical distance. All participants who were interviewed completed the survey questionnaire after they were interviewed. Those who were interviewed over the phone were posted the survey and returned the completed document by post to the researcher.

Participants were invited to speak about their experiences of bullying at work and what occurred after they complained about the behaviours to which they were subjected. The interviews lasted around one hour to one and half hours in length and were audio recorded. Audio recordings were then transcribed. Names of the participants were changed during the transcription and identifying features of the organisation were removed from the transcripts or changed in order to preserve the anonymity of the participants.

## **2.4 Analysing the Interview Data**

The majority of studies on workplace bullying have been conducted as survey studies, typically measuring respondent's exposure to predefined negative behaviours using questionnaires, such as those cited above. However, one of the problems with studies that use only objective criteria or that predominantly utilise survey

instruments is that these questionnaires do not take into account the subjective perceptions of the behaviour being studied, nor the organisational culture or context in which the behaviour occurs. For example, I may indicate on a survey that I have been 'subjected to comments of a sexual nature' or that I have 'yelled at by my supervisor,' but I may not consider that behaviour to be sexual harassment or bullying. What may be considered bullying in one context, such as in a professional office, may not be considered bullying in another; for example, at a construction site. This accounts, in part, for the differences in prevalence rates between objective measures using survey instruments and subjective measurements of bullying. Further, most studies have utilised either survey instruments such as the Negative Acts Questionnaire (NAQ) (Einarsen et al., 2009) or have utilised interview techniques in order to examine workplace bullying. Very few studies have utilised a mixed methodology to provide interpretive validity or confirm empirical results.

In order to address this discrepancy, Mikkelsen and Einarsen (2001) and, more recently, Parzefall and Salin (2010), recommended that when using objective behavioural criteria to measure bullying, respondents may need to be given the additional opportunity to describe the subjective effects of exposure to the various negative acts. Specifically, Parzefall and Salin suggest that: 'More use of qualitative studies (e.g. interviews of targets) adhering to strict ethical standards could provide a useful perspective into the dynamics of the bullying experience and help explore it from the psychological contract breach and justice perspectives' (p. 772). In line with this, the present study incorporated interviews with targets in order to explore the subjective experiences of bullying and the experiences of what occurs when targets report this behaviour to management. The use of in-depth interviewing will enable



participants to talk about their perceptions of justice and the way that they perceived that their complaint was managed, either exacerbating or acting as a buffer against the effects of the behaviours they were exposed to.

One of the advantages of utilising in-depth interviews is that respondents can be probed for clarity or for more detailed information following their initial answer.

In-depth interview techniques have the following advantages:

Especially useful for eliciting participants meanings for events and behaviours and for generating a typology of cultural classification themes. The method is flexible in formulating working hypotheses and avoids oversimplification in description and analysis because of its rich narrative descriptions. (Marshall & Rossman, 1999)

The semi-structured interviews were loosely based around an interview guide (see Appendix D), which was made up of a series of open-ended questions derived from literature on workplace bullying and conflict and was designed to engage the participant in talking about specific aspects of their experience. The interviewer was able to deviate from the guide if a participant raised an important issue or provided an unusual answer to a question. The interviewer followed up questions with probes such as *‘Can you tell me more about that?’* or *‘There seems to be a discrepancy between what you said ... and ... can you tell me about that?’*

In carrying out the interviews, the researcher noted some problems with using the interview guide. For example, she found that the mere introduction of the topic of workplace bullying in question 1 engaged a high emotional response from many participants, and at times, it was difficult to move them to discuss areas that *she* wanted to explore, as the participant remained focused on the issues that *they* felt were most relevant. However, she decided that this was an important factor in itself, as

what she thought was relevant may not be, and as a researcher, she should be led by the meanings and interpretations of the event/s made by the research participants.

#### **2.4.1 Carrying out a thematic analysis**

Interview data is typically analysed through a thematic analysis in order to identify key themes and categories common in the experiences of participants. To identify these themes, this study analysed the transcripts using a thematic qualitative method of enquiry suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). Unlike *grounded theory* (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), which uses an inductive theoretical approach to the interview data, the present analysis was driven by previous bullying research that identified specific antecedents to workplace bullying (Hoel & Salin, 2003; Marcus & Schuler, 2004; Zapf & Einarsen, 2003; Zapf et al., 2003), as well as the literature that suggested that perceived fairness may be an important factor in employees' decisions to lodge workers' compensation claims (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Dollard et al., 1999; Winefield et al., 2010) following workplace bullying.

This form of literature-driven analysis endeavours to present the significance of the themes in relation to previous literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006). While it is acknowledged that this approach is influenced by the assumptions made in the literature, its strength lies in its potential for building on previous research and contributing a qualitative perspective on quantitative research findings that have reached similar conclusions. Themes and issues found in the qualitative data that have not previously been identified in the research literature may also be highlighted, and elements in the data that contradict previous research can also be brought to light and discussed (Mays & Pope, 2006).

Braun and Clarke (2006) describe six phases of thematic analysis. These are illustrated in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1  
*Phases of Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 7)*

	<b>Phase</b>	<b>Description of the process</b>
1	Familiarising yourself with your data	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas
2	Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating the data relevant to each code
3	Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme
4	Reviewing themes	Checking to see if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (level 1) and the entire data set (level 2), generating a thematic <i>'map'</i> of the analysis
5	Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme
6	Producing the report	The final opportunity for analysis, selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back to the analysis of the research question and the literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis

#### **2.4.2 Generating initial codes**

The *initial codes* begin to be generated after having transcribed, read and familiarised oneself with the data. During this early familiarisation process the data are read and re-read, notes are taken and the reflexive process described in section 1.3.2 of this thesis is carried out simultaneously. This early part of the coding process involves systemically analysing the portions of the interview transcripts by asking: *'What is the major idea that is summarised in the paragraph? What are the ideas that the participants are trying to get across? What are the issues that they are expressing that are important to them?'* It is these patterns, ideas and general themes that are

organised into initial codes. Each paragraph that is analysed can contain one or more of these initial open codes that later become the building blocks for the larger themes that emerge (from the data). It is during this phase that interesting aspects of the data and repeated patterns and codes may form the basis for future themes. According to (Boyatzis, 1998), 'the unit of coding is the most basic segment, or element of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomena' (p. 63). It is this unit of coding that is identified during this early coding process. A list of the initial codes identified during the open-coding phase can be found in Appendix E.

In order to provide some sense of conceptual order among the codes, in the current study, codes were placed in a chronological order from the beginning of the conflict through to the participants' perceptions that they were being bullied, the organisation's response and the consequences of reporting the bullying.

### **2.4.3 Developing initial themes**

This aspect of the analysis involves further development of the initial codes into more definitive themes that connect the codes in a meaningful way. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), the interpretive analysis of the data starts occurring in this phase where broader themes are developed. At the end of this stage of analysis, one should have a collection of *initial themes*. An initial thematic map can be drawn up from this stage of the coding process to identify the main themes and subthemes and the codes that did not seem to appear to fit into any of these categories (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

#### **2.4.4 Reviewing, defining and naming themes**

*Selective coding* is the process of integrating and refining the themes that were developed in the earlier into a larger theoretical scheme. This is the stage where new theory is said to emerge from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), or where the themes begin to address the research questions that are framed by the literature or prior theory (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Each individual theme needs to be able to tell a ‘story’ in relation to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As themes are reviewed, some may collapse into each other, others may need to be broken down and in some cases, it may become evident that there is not enough data to support the major theme (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This data may stand alone as ‘mini-themes’ or even exceptions to the major themes that have been developed. It is just as important to examine these ‘exceptions’ as it is to examine the major themes (Mays & Pope, 2006).

### **2.5 Quantitative study—Participants Surveyed**

Forty-four participants completed the survey (17 males and 27 women). Thirteen of these participants had not been interviewed because they volunteered to participate in the study after the qualitative/interview aspect of the data collection had been completed. Fourteen surveys were posted or e-mailed to those participants who wanted to take part in this aspect of the study. Thirteen completed surveys were returned.

## 2.6 Quantitative study—Materials

### 2.6.1 Organisational Justice Scales

The Organisational Justice Scales (Colquitt, 2001) were utilised to measure four dimensions of organisational justice. As these scales can be customised to assess and compare justice perceptions in different organisational contexts (Colquitt, 2001), all items were tailored to reflect procedures, outcomes and interactions involved in the resolution of a workplace bullying complaint.

The first seven questions in the Organisational Justice Scales provide a measurement of procedural justice (for example, *to what extent do you think that the procedures and processes used to address your complaint were free from bias?*); four questions measure distributive justice (for example, *the outcome of my complaint is appropriate given the extent to which I was bullied or harassed*), four items measure interpersonal justice (for example, *to what extent do you think the person who dealt with your complaint treated you in a polite manner?*), and five items measure informational justice (for example, *to what extent did he/she explain the complaint procedures and processes thoroughly*). All items use a five-point scale to measure the extent to which each item reflects the way the respondent's complaint was managed from 1 = *never* to 5 = *always*.

In testing the psychometric properties of the scale, Colquitt (2001) conducted two empirical studies to validate the measure and test the four-factor structure. Confirmatory analysis indicated that the measure was able to discriminate among four different organisational justice factors, providing evidence of the construct validity of the measure (Colquitt, 2001).

In one study, Ambrose and Schminke (2003) used Colquitt's (2001) Organisational Justice Scale to examine whether organisational structure moderated the relationship between procedural justice and perceived organisational support. In their study, the distributive, procedural and interactional scales had acceptable reliabilities (.96, .93 and .86, respectively), although they combined the interactional and informational justice scales to form one scale they labelled *interactional*. A similar procedure was followed in the current study, with the interactional and informational justice subscales combined to form an interactional subscale. The reliability coefficients in the current study were high, with a reliability of .90 for Procedural Justice; .92 for Interactional Justice and .89 for Distributive Justice Subscales.

### **2.6.2 Negative Acts Questionnaire**

Negative workplace behaviours have been measured by administering the Negative Acts Questionnaire—Revised (NAQ-R) (Einarsen et al., 2009). This recently revised version of the original NAQ consists of 22 items phrased in neutral terms and describes various types of workplace behaviours such as *someone withholding information that affects your performance* and *unwanted sexual attention*. Respondents are asked how often they have been exposed to the specific behaviour described and to circle the number that best corresponded with their experience on a five-point scale from 1 = *never* to 5 = *daily*.

There are three sub-factors in the NAQ-R: work-orientated bullying, consisting of seven items (such as *excessive monitoring of your work* or *being given tasks with unreasonable deadlines*), person-orientated bullying, made up of 12 items (such as *being humiliated or ridiculed in connection with your work* or *spreading*



*gossip or rumours about you*) and physically intimidating bullying made up of three items (such as *threats of violence or physical abuse*). No reference to the word *bullying* is used in the NAQ-R.

Einarsen et al. (2009) report the NAQ-R to be a reliable instrument with a Cronbach's alpha of .90 for the 22 items.

In keeping with this, the current study reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .91 for the total NAQ-R in the current study. The reliability variables for the work-orientated bullying and person-orientated bullying subscales were satisfactory with coefficients of .72 and .89, respectively. Due to the small number of items that made up the physically intimidating subscale, it has been suggested that it may be more appropriate to report the inter-item correlation for the items, with an optimal range of the inter-item correlation being between .2 to .4 (Briggs & Cheek, 1986). In this study, the inter-item correlation between the three items that made up the physical intimidation subscale of the NAQ-R was .27, which is considered satisfactory.

However, after responding to the items on the questionnaire, respondents are provided with a definition of workplace bullying and asked whether, based on that definition, they consider themselves a victim of bullying. The definition used in the current study is as follows:

A situation where repeated unreasonable behaviour is directed towards an employee or a group of employees, and that a reasonable person would expect to victimise, humiliate, undermine or threaten the employee or employees to whom the behaviour is directed.

For those respondents who consider that they had been bullied according to the definition given, follow-up questions are provided in relation to the duration of the bullying and who carried out the bullying.

### **2.6.3 Depression Anxiety Stress Scale**

The Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS) (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) has been chosen to measure respondents' levels of anxiety, depression and stress. The DASS is a 42-item self-report inventory that describes a number of symptoms assessing depression, anxiety and general non-specific arousal (stress). Respondents are asked to report the degree to which each symptom was experienced over the past week on a four-point scale ranging from 0 = *did not apply to me at all*, to 3 = *applied to me very much*.

The DASS 21 is a half-length version of the scales, and the items selected for the DASS 21 represent all the subscales in order that a full DASS score can be obtained by multiplying the DASS 21 score by two. Interpretation of the DASS is on the basis of percentile scores with scores of 0–78 classified as *normal*, 78–87 as *mild*, 87–95 as *moderate*, 95–98 as *severe* and 98–100 as *extremely severe* (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995).

Lovibond and Lovibond (1995) report that the DASS as a valid and reliable measure of depression, anxiety and stress in both clinical and non-clinical samples and therefore will be used to measure these variables in the current study. In the current study, the reliability coefficients for the depression, anxiety and stress subscales of the DASS were all satisfactory with Cronbach's alphas of .87, .91 and .78, respectively.

#### 2.6.4 Organisational Commitment Scales

Allen and Meyer (1990) developed the Organisational Commitment Scales (OCS) to measure a three-dimensional construct of organisational commitment. They conceptualised these dimensions as *affective or emotional attachment to the organisation*, *perceived costs (of leaving)* and *obligation to the organisation* as follows:

The affective component of organizational commitment ...refers to the employee's emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization. The continuance component refers to commitment based on the costs that the employee associates with leaving the organization. Finally the normative component refers to the employee's feelings of obligation to remain with the organisation. (Allen & Meyer, 1990, p. 1)

The scales are divided into three subscales consisting of eight statements in each subscale. Each statement is scored on a seven-point scale with respondents asked to report the degree to which they agree or disagree with the statement from 1 = *strongly disagree*, to 7 = *strongly agree*.

Although the OCS are made up of three subscales, results of confirmatory studies found a significant relationship between the affective commitment subscale and the normative commitment subscale, signifying they may be measuring similar constructs (Allen & Meyer, 1990). This suggested that a person's obligation to stay with an organisation is significantly linked with their emotional attachment to the organisation (Allen & Meyer, 1990). Randall, Fedor and Longenecker (1990) also found that both affective commitment and normative commitment subscales were significantly related to commitment behaviour in the workplace, but the continuous commitment subscale showed little relationship with commitment behaviour. This

finding supports Allen and Meyer's (1990) recommendation that more evidence and refinement of the questionnaire needs to occur before the normative commitment scale is used with much confidence. For this reason, the present study aims to only utilise the affective commitment and continuance commitment subscales of the OCS.

In the current study, the reliability coefficient for the affective commitment subscale was initially .66, with a low inter-item correlation of .19. However, after deleting item 4: *I could get just as attached to another organisation as I am to this one*, the Cronbach's alpha increased to .67, and the inter-item correlation increased to a satisfactory .22. The Cronbach's alpha for the affective commitment scale was satisfactory with a coefficient of .79.

### **2.6.5 Vengeance Scale**

Stuckless and Goranson's (1992) Vengeance Scale was used in the current study as a measure of revenge. These scales are made up of 20 items dealing with attitudes about responses to perceived wrongs (for example, *It is important for me to get back at people who have hurt me; I don't just get mad I get even*). Nine of the items on the Vengeance Scale were reverse-scored (items 1, 4, 5, 8, 9, 13, 16, 18 and 19), and scores ranged from 1 = *disagree strongly* to 7 = *agree strongly*.

Findings from the initial development of the Vengeance Scale found that the scale has a high level of internal consistency for both males and females and a high reliability (Stuckless & Goranson, 1992). During the validation of the Vengeance Scale, Stuckless and Goranson (1992) found that there was a low negative correlation with the Marlowe–Crone Social Desirability Scale, which indicated that the Vengeance Scale was only minimally contaminated by social desirability.

The reliability of the Vengeance Scale in the current study was satisfactory with a Cronbach's alpha of .89.

## Chapter 3: Results of the Qualitative Stage of the Complainants'

### Study

#### 3.1 Open Coding/Generating the Initial Codes

Sixty-eight separate codes were identified during the initial phase of coding. These can be found in Appendix D. Each participant's interview transcript was coded according to the ideas or issues that were raised. For example, the following selection of transcript illustrates the codes of *disability*, *difficulty the group had in accommodating the participant's disability* and the *group bullying* of the participant. These codes reflected the difficulty that the participant believed her work colleagues had in accommodating her dog, accommodating her need for specialised programs on the computer for blind people and the lack of cooperation from the workgroup in relation to accommodating her needs as a blind person.

There were things like the dog, [**code:** needed others to accommodate her disability] some of the other staff [**code:** more than one staff member] would say the dog was a hindrance because if she was sitting next to me it might hinder me from getting from one post to the other faster. There were things around the computer. I was sharing with four people and the others just refused to do anything that accommodated my disability around this software that I had to use [**code:** difficulty accommodating disability.] The fact that they would send me e-mails and they were not prepared to turn my software off or turn it back on again when they had finished [**code:** group behaviour].

As illustrated by the transcript above, the participant felt that a number of staff found her disability difficult to accommodate and the behaviour of the group as a whole contributed to what she saw as bullying.

As suggested by Boyatzis (1998) and Braun and Clarke (2006), when all the codes were identified and collected they were grouped in a meaningful way. This meant that the next stage in the coding process, the *axial coding*, was made easier.

### **3.2 Developing Themes**

During this phase of analysis, the initial codes that were identified were merged into more definitive themes that represented broader common concepts. For example, codes such as *disability*, as discussed in the excerpt above in section 3.1, were grouped with other codes that related to the targets' characteristics and therefore *targets' characteristics* then became one of the broader themes identified. Figures 3.1 to 3.4 illustrate the different initial themes developed during this stage. Several of these initial themes were later amalgamated to represent the broad themes in the final thematic map.

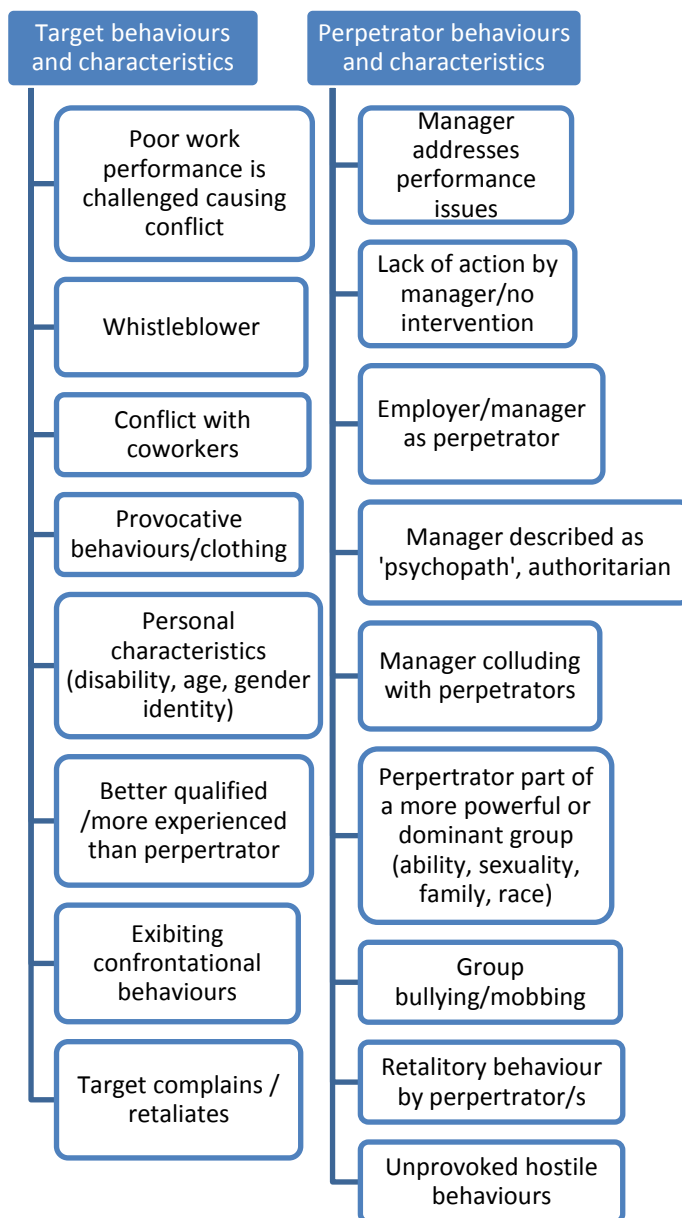


Figure 3.1. Initial themes: Target behaviour and characteristics and perpetrator behaviour and characteristics.





*Figure 3.2.* Initial themes: Workplace social environment and workplace industrial environment.

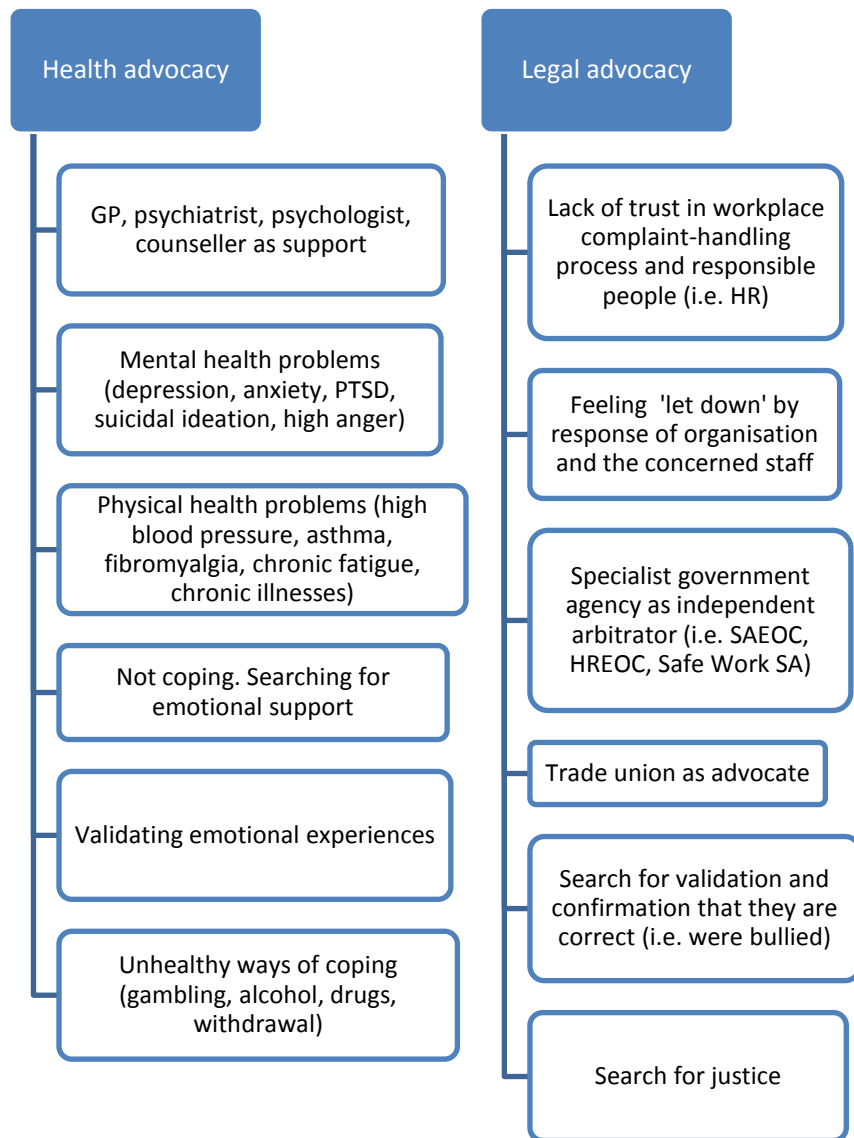
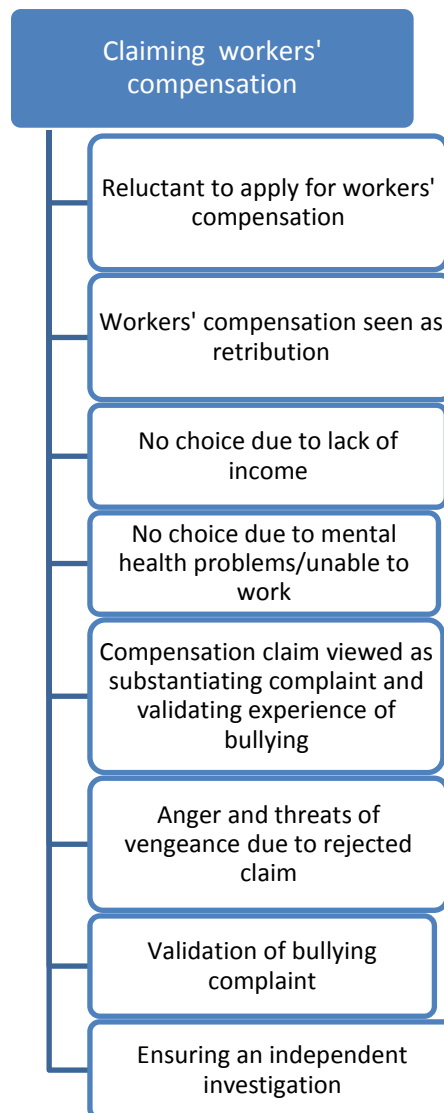


Figure 3.3. Initial themes: Legal advocacy and health advocacy.



*Figure 3.4.* Initial theme: Workers' compensation.

The themes generated during this stage of analysis were further refined and amalgamated, and a final 'thematic map' was generated. This map illustrates how the dominant themes fit together to form an overall pattern to tell the story of workplace bullying described by the participants. Figure 3.5 illustrates this thematic map and the six main themes to emerge from the analysis. These six themes, placed in chronological order, tell the overall sequence of events, starting with the antecedents

to the bullying through to the decision to leave the organisation. These themes will be discussed below, with examples from selected transcripts for illustration and to provide context. The codes that contributed to the main themes will also be outlined with examples from selected transcripts.

Despite the major six themes being quite distinct and separate parts of the bullying experience, they also overlapped and were interwoven, influencing the next stage in the complaint process and repercussions of the participant's experience with the complaint process. For example, the antecedents of the bullying complaint (theme 1) contributed to the conflicts that were identified as bullying by the participants (theme 2). The consequences of the bullying contributed to the mental and physical repercussions (theme 3), which in turn contributed to the sense of injustice and unfairness (theme 4). Due to the sense of injustice, in reaction to both the bullying itself and the way in which the bullying was being managed at work, most participants sought advocacy (theme 5), and a majority made a worker's compensation claim (theme 6). An accepted worker's compensation claim was seen as validating the perception of being bullied at work and as validating the negative health consequences of the bullying. A successful worker's compensation claim also validated the belief that the organisation had managed the bullying complaint badly.

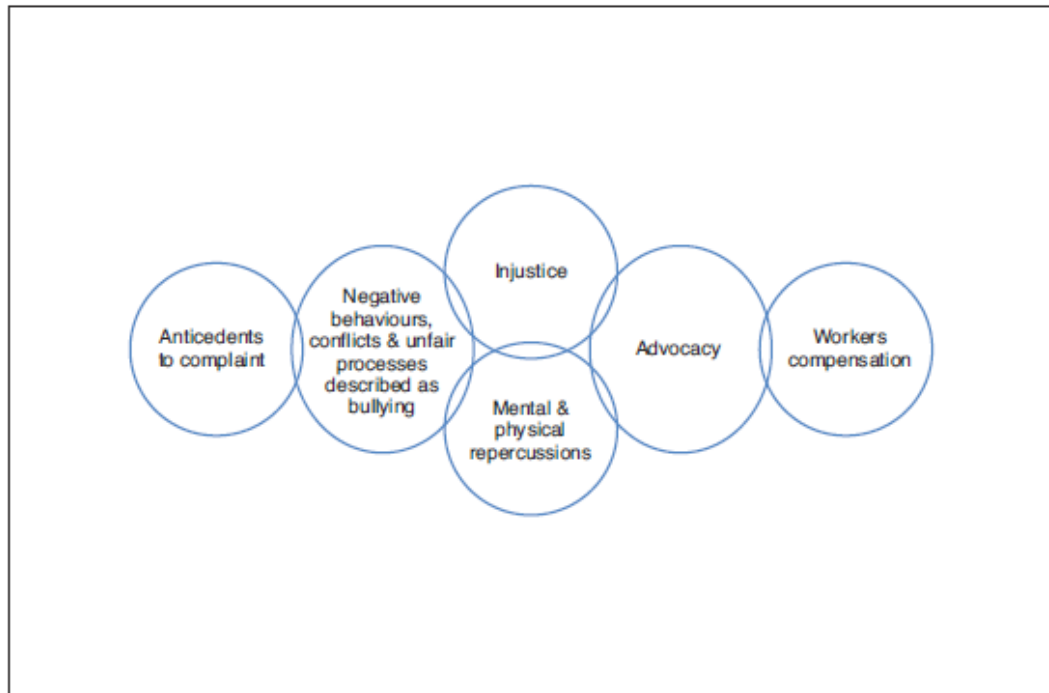


Figure 3.5. Final thematic map to emerge from coding.

The stories from the participants also described a pattern of conflict escalation that was common to most situations. As illustrated in Figure 3.6, in all cases the bullying allegations arose from conflict about discrete behaviours, the rights of the participant being denied or perceived needs in the workplace not being met. In some cases the bullying was unprovoked and was not precipitated by any action by the complainant, but was the result of the complainant being in a powerless position within a dominant and hostile group. However, even this unprovoked bullying appeared to escalate when the target complained. The escalated conflicts were framed as bullying when the target was unable to resolve the issues and continued to be subjected to hostile behaviours. Framing the conflict as *bullying* served to escalate the conflict. The next stage of the conflict-escalation cycle occurred when the participant complained about workplace bullying and the

organisation failed to address the complaint or support the target in the way the target perceived they should. This increased the target's sense of injustice and they moved outside of the organisation to seek advocacy. This took the form of union intervention, a complaint to a government department or assistance from their treating medical specialist, who usually confirmed the psychological and physical impact the bullying was having on the participant. During this time the conflict becomes adversarial with the target seeking to prove that they were bullied (or discriminated against or sexually harassed) and the organisation justifying their actions as reasonable management actions. In the current study a number of the participants left the organisation at this stage, submitted a worker's compensation claim and took legal action against the employer. Legal redress took the form of a worker's compensation claim and to a lesser extent a complaint to the South Australian Equal Opportunity Commission (SAEOC) or the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC), as a way of having the complainant addressed in what the complainant perceived as a fair manner.

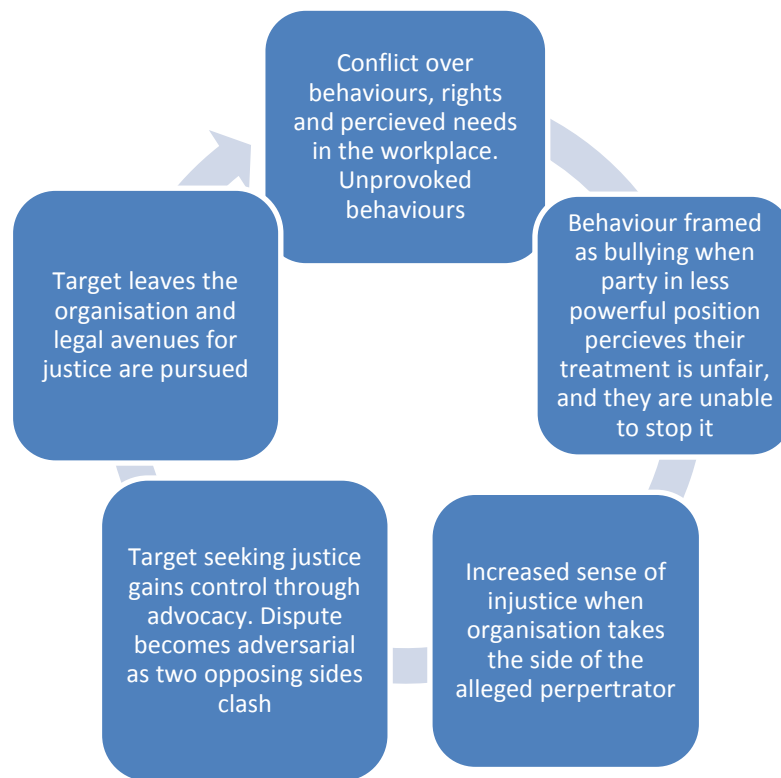


Figure 3.6. Cycle of conflict escalation as described by majority of participants in the study.

### 3.3 Theme 1: Antecedents to the Workplace Bullying Complaint

Four distinct subthemes that related to the antecedents of the bullying complaint were identified and are illustrated in Figures 3.1 and 3.2. These were *target behaviours and characteristics*, *perpetrator behaviours and characteristics*, *workplace social environment* and *workplace industrial environment*. All illustrated the background of the bullying complaint and contributed to the behaviour being conceptualised as bullying by the complainant.

Similar antecedents have also been described in research that has found that workplace bullying does not occur in isolation, but occurs in a background where a

combination of target and perpetrator characteristics and the characteristics of the workplace environment interact allowing inappropriate behaviours to occur (Einarsen, 1999; Salin, 2003; Zapf et al., 2003, Agervold, 2009). The themes that are described by participants in the current study also support the occupational health and safety approach to bullying, where certain negative workplace environments and management styles are viewed as potential workplace hazards that can increase the risk of bullying occurring (Capponecchia & Wyatt, 2007, 2009).

### **3.3.1 Target characteristics and behaviours**

The finding that targets' behaviours or characteristics sometimes contributed to bullying is supported in other research, with a number of studies highlighting the contribution that targets' own behaviours can make to workplace bullying (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996b; Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2001a; Zapf, 1999). As previously highlighted, these findings do not mean that targets are responsible for the inappropriate behaviours that have been perpetrated against them. However, the targets may have attributes or behaviours that isolate them from established group norms or they may possess characteristics or behaviours that may contribute to the workgroup or a person in power treating them badly. For example, in one case in this study, a transsexual participant who was working in a predominantly male-dominated blue-collar industry was bullied and sexually harassed because of being a transgender woman. While that does not make her responsible for the bullying, the threat that her gender posed to the status quo contributed to the bullying. From a social psychology perspective, she was targeted because she did not fit into the workgroup and was seen as one of them' as opposed to one of us'. This type of attribution style was illustrated in a number of cases in which participants did not fit into an established



workgroup norm because of a characteristic that was different such as being blind, being transgender or being a minority racial group in a predominantly mono-culture. The type of bullying that she and others in the study, were exposed to comes under the heading of predatory bullying (Einarsen, 1999), because the culture of the organisation was tolerant to the bullying and the target was attacked because she represented an out-group in which the bullies were able to justify their behaviour as legitimate (Einarsen, 1999). In another case, the participant behaved in a way that violated group norms by being a whistle blower on illegal group activity. She could be labelled a provocative target, as blowing the whistle contributed to retaliatory bullying by the rest of the group. The consequence of this was she was ousted from the group and was made the target of the group's anger.

The manner in which target characteristics or behaviours violated established group norms and may have contributed to the bullying is illustrated in the following transcripts.

Angela identifies as a transgender female and worked in a blue-collar industry, in a small family-owned male-dominated business. Some of her duties entailed hosing down effluent in a slaughter yard, driving heavy machinery and delivering goods. During her employment she identified as a male, had a male name and dressed as a male. She told me that she did not tell anyone at work that she was undergoing gender reassignment, although she was taking hormone therapy, was developing breasts and outside of work identified herself as a woman. She reported that soon after she started work she was subjected to significant sexual harassment, teasing and bullying in relation to her sexual identity. The behaviour escalated from comments by staff about her clothing, breasts and questions regarding her sexuality to significant degradation

and gross sexual harassment from her employer and other male staff members. She explained it in the following words:

I basically just wore tank tops most of the time because they were getting covered in effluent and it was one of those things when you are cleaning yourself down and having to hose your clothing down constantly you didn't want to wear anything heavy. Yes [they could see my breasts under my tee shirt]. ... They did comment on several occasions and it became obvious with the questions that they would constantly ask regarding my sexuality. ... he initially said that wasn't sexual harassment and eventually said that I had encouraged it. (Angela)

This transcript illustrates personal characteristics that contributed to the predatory bullying that Angela was exposed to. Angela was undergoing transgender reassignment and was physically 'different' from the men she was working with. In the perpetrators' eyes, according to Angela, 'she encouraged' the harassment that she was exposed to because of her sexuality and 'difference'. The perpetrators could see her breasts under her shirt and questioned her on a number of occasions about her sexuality. Her sexuality made her stand out from the rest of the small workforce and made her a target of sexual harassment. However, the workplace social environment was tolerant of the behaviours against her and encouraged the predatory behaviour towards Angela. The behaviour toward Angela could be considered predatory because there was no conflict over rights, values or interests, but she was being subjected to hostile attacks because of innate characteristics that placed her apart from the dominant heterosexual male environment.

Brenda's transcript below also revealed characteristics or behaviours that may have contributed to the bullying. The bullying that she reported illustrates the conflict-escalation approach to bullying and can be contrasted with the predatory

bullying described by Angela above. Brenda describes conflict between herself and her team leader that began when she challenged the team leader's decisions and 'undermined' the team leader's authority or position. She talks about listening and supporting a new worker that was having trouble with the team leader and this behaviour too, may have been viewed as undermining or threatening her team leader. The conflict starts from a particular incident and then escalates as the team leader and manager try to address the behaviours. Brenda described her situation as follows:

It started from a particular incident where the team leader decided to undertake some training which I disputed she needed ... I knew that training wouldn't do her any good, and I told her ... She might have seen that I undermined her ... Then it came to my attention that the new worker was having some troubled times with the team leader ... and I wanted to listen and support her ... The team leader told me that my job was not to listen to any other staff person, once again demonstrating that I was stepping out of line. [When I complained], my manager said that you got to follow what your team leader says and if she feels that way then I will support her. (Brenda)

As illustrated above, the type of bullying described by Brenda fits within a conflict-escalation paradigm. Brenda challenged her team leader's decisions and also offered the new worker 'support' when the new worker had difficulties with the team leader. Brenda's undermining behaviours towards the team leader contributed to the manager reprimanding Brenda over her behaviour. On reflection, Brenda reported that the team leader may have thought that she undermined her. However, the reprimand by the manager was seen by Brenda as siding (unfairly) with the team leader and the conflict between Brenda, her team leader and manager escalated over time. Brenda's provocative behaviours contributed to the conflict that she labelled as bullying. Brenda's behaviour could be interpreted as provocative, as she undermines

her team leader's authority and contributes to splitting, by supporting staff in a manner that may further weaken the team leader's control.

In another case, Debbie, who has a visual impairment, reported inappropriate and belittling behaviours by colleagues and by her manager. She felt that her disability was not being accommodated. This transcript illustrates how targets can be marginalised by the 'normative' culture of the workforce and the difficulty the workplace culture has in accommodating 'difference':

There were things like the dog; some of the other staff would say the dog was a hindrance because if she was sitting next to me it might hinder them from getting from one post to the other faster. There were things around the computer. I was sharing with four people and the other people just refused to do anything that accommodated my disability around this software that I had to use ... So I tried to negotiate things ... but that didn't work. The more I [tried to negotiate], the more aggravation it caused because people felt that they had to be put out ... If I went to my Team Leader she would say things like why should you get a special pager, other people have rights too ... It was such a degrading experience, it was like I couldn't read or write ... It kept getting worse and worse to the stage that I was crying, I felt really out of control. I said that I had to leave. I have never been in a group of people that bitched about someone like that before, about me as a person, like I wasn't worth anything. (Debbie)

The target characteristic that Debbie had that contributed to the bullying was that she was visually impaired. As described above, Debbie's needs around the workgroup assisting her in relation to the visual impairment contributed to the bullying that she was exposed to. Her transcript illustrates how the workgroup would not accommodate her disability and the more she tried to negotiate some sort of assistance the more this contributed to people in the workgroup feeling put out.

Debbie reported that the behaviour that she was subjected to, including the bitching' by her colleagues, contributed to considerable psychological distress and eventually she complained about workplace bullying. Again, this type of bullying could be interpreted as predatory, as Debbie did not fit into the established norm (she was not able-bodied) and the group would not accommodate her disability. It is interesting to note that Debbie talked about utilising a conflict-management approach to the behaviour in the first instance through negotiating with them. However, this was unsuccessful. While this became an escalated-conflict situation, it began with the group 'ganging up' on Debbie and the conflict was predatory in nature.

The next participant, Erin, left her employment following victimisation by colleagues after blowing the whistle' on what she saw as illegal work practices, such as staff utilising government cars out of hours, her supervisor failing to submit leave forms and other breaches of the public service code of conduct. She had previously described her colleagues as friends and the workplace as a family where they would often socialise together out of hours. This transcript illustrates both target behaviour and workplace characteristics as antecedents to the bullying. It also illustrates the provocative' victim, where Erin's behaviour initiated the retaliatory bullying against her by the other staff:

I supposed I could be termed as a whistle blower. I had spoken to management about practices that were happening where I was working that I didn't think were legal, that were definitely against the Code of Conduct ... I know what I did was right and I don't think I could still be in that workplace watching what was going on, knowing what was going on and sit down and do nothing about it. It is a blatant misuse of finances and funds. For someone to hire a car and charge it up to their manager and drive around in cars and order champagne, it just wasn't right ... The consequences of it was the

manager then spoke to this person about what they were doing. That's when the repercussions started to occur ... I still am very depressed I lost my job, my friends I had there and social occasions, Christmas time, even things like the Melbourne Cup where we all would have a Melbourne Cup sweep. I was very close, in fact the person I worked for was also Godfather to my children. After 20 years working in the place, whilst I still wanted to see the people who were my friends. (Erin)

This transcript illustrates how the target's behaviour (blowing the whistle) contributed to the bullying by the workgroup. Erin could be labelled the provocative victim, for inciting the behaviour that was targeted towards her. In the transcript she reflects how the workgroup were all friends and that she had worked with them for 20 years. However, when she 'blew the whistle' on illegal activities that they were carrying out, the once-friendly group retaliated against her.

While all the transcripts illustrated above illustrate different behaviours or characteristics of these targets, they collectively show that bully victims are not a homogeneous group and that some targets may provoke bullying behaviours through their own actions (as illustrated in Erin's transcript), some may be the targets of unprovoked attacks or predatory bullying (such as described in Debbie's or Angela's transcripts) and others may escalate conflicts through their own behaviours (for example, as illustrated in Brenda's transcript). These transcripts also illustrate that at times the alleged bully may be responding appropriately to the target's inappropriate behaviours. For example, in Brenda's transcript, the undermining behaviour toward her team leader appeared to be addressed appropriately by the manager. However, as Brenda's behaviour at work continued to be challenged by the manager and team leader, this was framed as bullying. Together, the interviews illustrate the different

types of bully victims and suggest that taking a uniform approach to bullying may be a simplistic notion.

### **3.3.2 Perpetrators' characteristics**

The finding that perpetrator characteristics were identified as a distinct theme by the participants was not surprising. Although all of the complainants described the perpetrator in terms of a single concept: a *bully*, the behaviours of the bully tended to take one of three forms. Perpetrators either fell into the category of the bully as an active tormenter or predator, the bully as an agitator in an escalating-conflict situation or the bully as colluding with another perpetrator, often through their inaction or lack of support. That is, in the current study around a third of the cases were where managers, HR consultants and senior staff failed to support the complainant and were therefore framed by the complainant as bullies themselves, due to their inaction.

Suzette was an experienced receptionist who reported being bullied by a new manager. Her description of the new manager's behaviours fits into the category of predatory bullying and exemplifies the authoritarian management style of many bullies that is reported in a number of studies (Zapf & Einarsen, 2003). The transcript also illustrates the *power* that the bully possesses over the target and other staff on account of the management position:

Then she came in and virtually stripped our office of everything without asking. All our notes came off the wall, she just did it, cleaned the office up when we weren't there. All of our postcards from our holidays off the wall. She wasn't interested in your opinion ... Then she decided that she would do staff evaluation interviews after being there two weeks which I thought was surprising. She gave us all a form to fill in about ourselves. Quite personal

information about our home life which I thought was inappropriate ... By this stage people were getting a bit 'pissed off' with her and her attitude ... every girl that came out of her interview came out sobbing and they would run off into the toilet ... She had called another couple of girls in and torn strips off them like they were school girls ... she said well I am the practice manager here and everyone will just do as I say. She said sit down. I said no I don't want to sit down. She said when I tell you to sit down, you sit down. I am your boss. (Suzette)

Suzette's transcript describes the practice manager as a very authoritarian person who was not interested in the opinion of her staff, who reduced staff to tears during performance reviews and who appeared to be a predatory bully in that she targeted all the staff without provocation. According to Suzette, the practice manager viewed herself as 'the boss' and appeared not to want to enter into any dialogue with staff, or take into account how her actions may impact on the staff. It appears that much of the perpetrator's behaviour occurred behind closed doors, where the girls 'would come out sobbing'. The manager would also carry out many of her actions when the staff group was not present, such as removing all of the postcards off the wall. While this sort of bullying may have started without predication, it contributed to conflict escalation as staff 'were getting a bit 'pissed off' with her and her attitude' and resulted in the complainant being reprimanded for reacting against the bullying.

Again, this next transcript illustrates the bully as a tormentor. Herman was a school librarian, who described being bullied by the new manager. As with the previous example given, he described the bully's behaviour in terms of the power she held over him and the authoritarian management style she exhibited:

So anyway this manager, her name was (sic), she won the position ... she would start arguments and she would assign remedial duties and shout at you



and at one stage she was even screaming at me on the last day of term there. She was just a very difficult person to get along with and she liked the power, she was very controlling with just the things she would say to you. Made negative comments about your work or if you arrived one minute late in the library there would be another comment. She would say things in front of students; embarrass you in front of other teachers too, embarrass you. There were just derogatory things. Nit-picking, being shouted at and being made to feel humiliated in front of people and a whole of range of things. (Herman)

Again the transcript above describes the authoritarian and controlling style of the perpetrator. However, unlike Suzette's transcript, where the behaviours occurred behind closed doors, Herman described the perpetrator publicly humiliating him in front of students and staff. In contrast with Suzette's transcript, Herman appeared to be the only librarian targeted by the perpetrator, whereas in Suzette's case she described all the employees being targeted by the practice manager.

Frank was another participant who left work following bullying from his employer. He described the perpetrator in the following words:

He was a hard task master. He was always very abusive, no people skills ... absolute arrogance, arrogant person to get along with. There are ten people working there, six of them are family and it is a situation of them ganging up ... and the boss always of the opinion that he owned the company, he could do as he pleased and it was just always him screaming, yelling, swearing, just verbally abusing, threatening. I was just told in very abusive with lots and lots of bad language that if I didn't like it, I could leave. (Frank)

The excerpts from Frank's transcript draw attention to the perpetrator's management style as a hard task master' and to the social culture of the workplace where six family members work and it was a situation of them ganging up.' As the boss and owner of the family business, this perpetrator set the tone of the workplace

environment and the family members who ganged up were able to get away with their behaviours. Again, the perpetrator/s can be viewed as tormentors and the family members as ganging up.

The next participant, David, referred to the bully's behaviour as that of a psychopath:

I find her style very much harassing ... I mean letters, messages, critical comments, put downs, her sighs in meetings explosive comments that cause everybody to go into silence and not dare disagree with her. She clearly is the institutional psychopath that John Clark refers to in his book. (David)

David describes the bully within the framework described in some of the popular books written about workplace bullies such as: *Working with Monsters: How to Protect Yourself against the Workplace Psychopath* (Clarke, 2005), and these can influence how workplace bullies are described by targets. David specifically refers to Clarke's (2005) book in describing the perpetrator. However, he believed he was not able to respond or retaliate to her behaviour that was predatory in nature.

In the next transcript the bully is described again, in terms that suggest a style of management that is very task-orientated and where bullying is used as a specific management tactic to achieve results:

I have a new team leader who was a sergeant in the army for 25 years ... makes no secret of his desire to climb the ladder. It is like working with the military. He has completely subjugated all of them ... he has set his own benchmarks which are significantly higher than the national benchmarks because he likes to see that our team is number one nationally. (Imogene)

Imogene describes her team leader as very career-orientated with a history of working in the military (a highly authoritarian and task-orientated organisation). He

is focused on achieving high standards, (he likes to see that our team is number one nationally'), but it appears that this is to the detriment of his people-management skills, as Imogene reports that he has subjugated' all of the staff in the team through his authoritarian management style. Again, this excerpt describes the bully as the tormentor.

While the transcripts cited above reflect very authoritarian and task-oriented management styles of the bullies (what I call a *tormenting style* of bullying), around a third of the participants saw their manager's lack of action as colluding with the bullying or contributing to the bullying through lack of support for the complainant. The participant below describes her manager witnessing bullying but doing very little even when she specifically asked him to intervene:

He never really took charge; he just took away authority of the coordinators and just chucked it out there. As far as his management of this bully, he didn't do anything about it. He would always say, yes I will back you up but it escalated over the year ... He obviously. I can't really describe it. You know when you are getting support and when you are working together? I always felt that I never got that support. He is quite a loose, academic type person, a real social worker. They talk about it but nothing ever moves on. No decisions are ever made and when [name of bully] stood up and ... verbally abused me in front of all of the staff pointing his finger at me the manager sat there and did nothing. Personally, he should have dealt with that right then and there. He was witnessing it. That gives power to the bully when your manager sits there and oh, he says oh well we will have to have another meeting about this, we will have to have a talk about it which is scheduled for February. (Max)

In this case, the manager did not address the inappropriate behaviour exhibited by the bully, despite witnessing it, and therefore, the bullying was able to

continue. The manager in this case is seen as colluding with the bullying by effectively ignoring the behaviour. This next transcript again illustrates how reporting the bullying had no effect for some participants and the managers ended up siding with the bully, being seen as colluding with them:

They [the senior managers] have been told. I started by going to them and saying we have got a problem here. She said that it was always hard at the beginning and fobbed me off. I rang one of the [executives] because I knew he was working on the Saturday morning and I had a long talk to him on the phone. I said this is what is happening ... He was most sympathetic and he said we have a meeting on Monday night, we will discuss it. [Following the meeting] He said sit down, we have had our meeting and we have decided to support her one hundred per cent. I think that she convinced them at the meeting that I was over-reacting and they obviously didn't believe it for some reason. (Brenda)

Brenda's transcript illustrates how some complainants are criticised for over-reacting and are 'fobbed off' with the bullying problem minimised by higher management or HR. In this case the senior managers did not provide the support that Brenda asked for and were viewed as colluding with the bully through their inaction.

The next transcript describes the conflict-escalation model of bullying that occurred when Carole had returned from a year's leave and her job had significantly changed. It also describes the bullying escalating when Carole could not gain support from HR or the Executive Director in her complaint against the manager. As the conflict escalated, the Executive Director and HR Director were also named as bullies for colluding with the manager against her:

So I put in a written complaint to the Executive Director ... I had one meeting with him. I eventually got a memo from the Executive Director warning me. I have never in my entire working life got anything like this before. So I was

warned. There were three things that were said. I wasn't to go there, I wasn't to organise any meetings with other members of staff and this is from the Executive Director. Copies were sent to the manager. You can't win ... I had a meeting with the Human Resource Director then. A fucking bully, he was a total bully to me. There is nothing in there that you can legally do. (Carole)

As described from Carole's perspective, the executive director and the human resources' director became bullies too when they did not support her in the bullying complaint against her manager. This lack of support was viewed by about a third of participants in the study as colluding with the bully. As described in the transcript above, Carole's complaint of bullying escalated from a complaint against an individual to a complaint against a number of individuals when she was unable to gain support in the conflict with her manager.

All of the transcripts above illustrate the power that the individual perpetrator or the group had over the target and the inability of the target to redress a power imbalance. The characteristics of the perpetrator/s is such that they hold considerable power; either hierarchical power in terms of their position within the organisation (most were managers or were in higher positions of authority), or had gained their power because they were part of a dominant group by virtue of their ability (as opposed to disability), sexuality (they were heterosexual as opposed to transgender), they were a member of the perpetrator's family (and the target was not a family member) or they were part of the dominant cultural group. As illustrated in the transcripts above, there appeared to be three main categories of bullying: the perpetrators appeared to be targeting the complainant in an active predatory manner, were part of an escalated conflict with the complainant, or were named bullies by the complainant because of their failure to support the complainant or stop the alleged

bullying from occurring. However, these categories were not mutually exclusive, and overlapped in a number of ways. For example, predatory bullying was also closely linked with managerial style, and in two cases, linked with particular characteristics of the target that made them vulnerable (chosen gender and disability).

### **3.3.3 Industrial environment of the workplace**

As well as target and perpetrator behaviours and characteristics, a negative industrial environment emerged as a strong subtheme in the major theme of antecedents to the bullying complaint. A majority of the transcripts cited above in subthemes *complainant characteristics* and *perpetrator characteristics* also draw attention to the negative workplace environment in which the bullying occurred. The negative industrial environment included the participant describing feeling uncertain about their role within the organisation. This was contributed to by changes in job description and organisational restructuring. All participants reported lack of control over the way they were able to carry out their work in a highly monitored workplace, including threats of employment termination and high levels of conflict within the organisation. It was interesting to note that three participants referred to (then) recent changes in industrial legislation known as ‘\_Work Choices’ that had been introduced by the previous government and made it easier for employers to sack employees (this legislation has since been revoked). For example, Frank specifically referred to these laws and reported being threatened with dismissal as part of the bullying he was subjected to:

And since the changes in the IR laws at the start of 2006 I was just being continually threatened with dismissal, continually told by the management of the company that they could do as they pleased and because of the new IR

laws I didn't have a leg to stand on. They could sack me tomorrow and there was not a thing I could do about it. (Frank)

The new industrial relation (IR) laws that Frank was referring to contributed to considerable unrest for these employees, as the legislation allowed employers to dismiss workers much more easily than they had been able to previously. In the transcript cited above, the new laws contributed to the industrial climate of job insecurity and contributed to anxiety in relation to job security and permanence. The transcript also illustrates how these laws were used as part of bullying tactics employed in the workforce by some employers.

In the transcript below, Carole described returning to her job following a year's leave, to find her substantial position was redundant. Instead of carrying out her previous job, she was being asked to carry out work outside her job description and believed the work was below her level of competence and expertise. She was also deprived of work that she thought was available and she could carry out. She perceived this as bullying and it contributed to significant conflict with her manager, and later between Carole and the executive manager and then HR consultant. In this transcript, the escalation of the conflict is evident and interaction between target and perpetrator characteristics as well as workplace industrial issues are illustrated:

I was working half time in one department and half time in another one on a project for about a year. When that finished I went on two weeks' leave, then in May I came back to start working completely back in the Department. [She] said to me that I haven't got that much work for you to do and she gave me admin tasks which were equivalent to an ASO3 ... I have done work with legislation in the past so I could have done it, but she wouldn't let me ... and I got more and more distressed. I tried to get more work; she wouldn't give it to me and I could see that because of the restructure, and I have been working

in policies, my area for ten years, I could see that she wasn't going to give me any of the legislative work. (Carole)

As illustrated in Carole's transcript above, her role was resurrected while she was on leave and she believed that the work that was given to her on her return was not part of her job description and was below her level of competence. Conflict arose when her manager would not let her carry out the meaningful work at her level of competence (i.e. the legislative work she requested). These changes and the lack of meaningful work contributed to significant conflict between Carole and her manager and to the perception that she was being bullied by her manager.

This following transcript illustrates a work environment in which different rates of pay and different contracts for staff who carry out the same job contributed to high levels of workplace conflict:

We were all doing the same job, but some were employed by (name of the organisation) and some were employed on contract by another contracting company. It was very dodgy, because they were being paid a lot less than us for doing exactly the same job and it caused conflict between them and the staff that were permanent employees who were getting paid more. Anyway, this individual went to the manager of the contracting firm and said that I was celebrating the fact that they had just lost their contract and (another contracting company) were taking over. (Ethan)

In the transcript above, Ethan describes a work environment where the inequitable industrial culture in terms of pay and contracts contributed to one group of employees being awarded better pay and conditions than another group, despite them both doing the same job. This inequality contributed to conflict between the employees and Ethan was reported for 'celebrating' the fact they had lost their contract. Ethan saw this complaint against him as a form of bullying (escalated-



conflict type of bullying) from one group of employees. Ethan's transcript also suggests that he may have provoked the conflict and could be named as a provocative complainant for 'celebrating' the loss of contract.

This next participant, Adrian, worked as a casual security guard. He described a long history of conflict with the organisation following a work-related car accident. Following a reduction in his shifts and transfer to the office, he described poor training, an ambiguous job role and ongoing conflict with the reception staff with whom he was working. His retaliatory behaviours were eventually performance managed and he perceived this as bullying by management. When his worker's compensation claim for a stress-related injury was rejected, he interpreted this as the 'WorkCover' colluding with the employer and further bullying. This transcript excerpt illustrates the workplace culture (lack of training and lack of job description) that contributed to behaviours that Adrian described as bullying:

And it was when they actually deemed my injury [following a motor vehicle accident] as permanent, that's when, that's when things became bad. Eventually I got my job back and I was working in the office rather than outside. The new manager said they would try me out in their office. Where they had normally four days training for that I got two hours. So I was set up to fail, because I had been out of office work for a while, I didn't know what was happening policy wise or anything like that. (Adrian)

Adrian's transcript illustrates the work environment that contributed to him putting in a workplace bullying complaint. He described being unfamiliar with the office environment and protocols and having insufficient training to carry out his role. He reported feeling as though he had been 'set up to fail' in the job.

The transcripts cited above highlight the influence that a poor workplace industrial environment has on perpetrator and complainant behaviours. Ambiguous work roles, lack of meaningful work, lack of training and job insecurity were all illustrated in the transcripts cited above. These factors contributed to poor industrial climates that together with both target and perpetrator characteristics interacted and contributed to inappropriate behaviours (by both target and perpetrator): To add to this milieu, the social environment of the workplace also interacted with the industrial environment and the characteristics of the complainants and perpetrators to contribute to the bullying.

### **3.3.4 Social environment of the workplace**

The social environment of a workplace can interact with target characteristics and contribute to bullying when a target does not fit in to established norms. It appears that the social environment of the workplace has a very close association with a target's characteristics, because it is the interaction of these two factors that strongly contributes to the bullying. When examining the transcripts describing the complainants' characteristics in section 3.3.1, it is easy to also identify a social environment that contributed to the bullying. In the transcript below, Kylie talks about not fitting into a close-knit Russian group. She specifically talks about the group dynamics and her efforts to reduce the conflict with a meeting contributed to what she labelled *mobbing*:

It started from a pure conflict with one person, then it wasn't resolved at all ... and then the person who started it tried to organise her peers, and they organised as a group, and because they are all from a Russian background it is very much the cultural revolution ... before that, I talk to the new manager about the dynamics in the group and I didn't know what to do, but her

suggestion sounded really good. To organise a meeting and in a civilised manner our group sit down and resolve our differences ... the meeting between the groups was done in the Russian language and discussed how to punish me and get rid of me ... I think, I might be wrong that it is easier to get rid of one person than it is to get rid of the group. (Kylie)

The social culture of this workplace contributed to Kylie (who was from Bosnia) being targeted by the predominantly Russian women in the workplace. She referred to the social group as ‘the Russian revolution’ and reported that a meeting designed to address the conflict between her and the group turned into a meeting about how to get rid of her. The transcript describes a style of bullying that is escalated conflict, but is influenced by the two opposing social groups, with Kylie being a minority and not fitting into the Russian group. In this case, ethnic and racial tensions resulting from current international conflicts also contributed to the bullying and the tension between Kylie and the Russian group.

The transcript below illustrates how a participant was marginalised by the group and labelled a homosexual because he complained about accepted group norms. The transcript also illustrates the relationship between workplace group culture and a lax management style that contributed to the inappropriate behaviours being allowed to continue. It again illustrates a conflict-escalation style of bullying that was influenced by an inappropriate social environment at work that was highly sexualised:

One of them would get some disgusting pornographic short videos and show them on their phones. Then they would show each other and then transfer it to each other’s phones via blue tooth and the videos, a couple of them that I did see that I was shown they were absolutely disgusting, they were just nothing short of this violent erotica they were just absolutely degrading to women,

absolutely appalling that anyone would get any gratification out of watching that sort of thing and I would just tell them all the time that they had a real problem and how anyone gets any satisfaction or gratification at all seeing that sort of thing. They said that I must have been a poof because I found it disgusting. They said that I must be homosexual if I didn't find it really good and look at all of these things. I would complain to the boss about this and he said oh yes they do it all the time. (Frank)

In the transcript above, Frank was describing a sexualised social environment where pornography was the norm and most of the male employees distributed and read pornography. However, when he spoke out about, the boss' normalised the behaviour as something they do all the time', and the employees singled Frank out because he did not participate in the behaviours, calling him a homosexual and a poofster because he did not want to participate.

Other participants described the organisation as a family business and reported that family members stuck together, even when acting inappropriately:

Management was all family and a large percentage of the employees were friends of the family; they were people that they had gone to school with. (Angela)

There are ten people working there, six of them are family and it was a situation of them ganging up and the boss always of the opinion that he owned the company, he could do as he pleased. (Frank)

They were all the same ... they are all tarred with the same brush. It was a family business, so whoever you spoke to I was still going to get the same treatment no matter what. (Patricia)

In these three excerpts, Angela and Frank and Patricia reported that the bullying was led by the head of the family. As it was a family business, none of these

participants felt that they were able to have any influence over how the business was run or the behaviour of the perpetrators.

These transcripts illustrate how the social environment of the workplace, including the social group, the cultural group and sexualised culture of the workplace can promote workplace bullying and harassment because of the difficulty the target had in challenging the power that is held by the dominant group. Family businesses presented a further challenge due to the family dynamics and ties and behaviours that supported a bullying culture.

The four subthemes described within this greater theme of *antecedents* interact and contribute to the bullying occurring and escalating. Discussions with all the participants indicated that the bullying occurred within the context of poor industrial or inappropriate social environments that provided an opportunity for the perpetrator to bully. The characteristics of about a third of the complainants, at times, also contributed to the bullying, either through their actions (which either instigated or escalated the conflict) or through the complainant having personal characteristics that were targeted by the perpetrators. The next theme identified in the interviews describes the range of behaviours that were labelled as *bullying* and the different behaviours that the participants were exposed to.

### **3.4 Theme 2: Negative Behaviours, Conflicts and Unfair Processes**

*Negative workplace behaviours* labelled and perceived as bullying was a major theme to emerge from the analysis. This theme reflected a wide range of behaviours that were all labelled as *bullying* by participants. Some of these behaviours were clearly inappropriate, and others appeared to be neutral, but were

interpreted and labelled as bullying by the targets. In some cases attempts by managers to address the participant's inappropriate or provocative behaviours were interpreted as bullying. The failure of a manager to support a participant who complained about bullying was also labelled bullying by some participants. Other behaviours that were labelled as bullying included sexual harassment, workplace discrimination/harassment, conflicts with colleagues, disagreements with managers over work roles, unrealistic performance targets or changes in job description, mobbing behaviours (i.e. group bullying), victimisation (reprisal for something the target had done) and workplace bullying (repeated inappropriate behaviours targeting the participant). Participants labelled all of these negative behaviours as *bullying*. Some targets acknowledged that the behaviour they were being subjected to was discrimination (being treated unfavourably because of a personal characteristic that is covered under the anti-discrimination legislation), but also viewed the unfavourable treatment against them as bullying. It was also interesting to note that some participants labelled workplace changes and restructuring and changes in their roles as workplace bullying, especially when these changes were not wanted and contributed to significant conflict with their manager. The variety of behaviours and situations described in the previous section (3.3: Theme 1: Antecedents to the Workplace Bullying Complaint) illustrate the wide range of behaviours and conflicts that were labelled as bullying by participants.

While these results draw attention to the wide range of behaviours that are labelled as bullying, they also highlight a number of different types of bullying and suggest bullying is not a homogenous concept. Some of the bullying behaviours described by participants began with conflicts between two or more parties that

escalated. They were labelled as bullying by participants as the conflict worsened, supporting the conflict-escalation models of bullying proposed by Zapf and Gross (2001). Some of these conflicts were precipitated by the complainant's own behaviour; however, the conflict escalated to a stage where the participant believed they were being bullied and labelled the conflict as bullying. In contrast, predatory bullying occurred when participants were targeted without any provocation or previous conflict. Some of the examples of predatory bullying included sexual harassment or discriminatory bullying when the complainant was targeted because of their gender, sexuality or disability. The third type of bullying occurred when the complainants' failed to receive the support that they expected after complaining about the behaviours they were exposed to. This lack of support was viewed as colluding with the bully and was viewed by participants as bullying in itself.

While describing the negative behaviours to which they were subjected, all participants described a strong sense of injustice in the way they were treated in each of the different situations. It appeared in the analysis that a sense of injustice was central to the situation or negative interactions being labelled as bullying, and injustice formed a strong theme in itself as described below.

### **3.5 Theme 3: Injustice**

The third major theme that emerged from the interviews was a strong sense of unfairness in the way the complaint was managed in the workplace. Perceptions of unfairness contributed to participants seeking advocacy outside the organisation in order to help them gain what they felt was rightfully theirs: a fair investigation and outcome in their favour. Seeing a lawyer or complaining through a government

agency was viewed by some participants as one way that they would be able to have unbiased intervention into their complaint of bullying.

The concept of revenge was also linked with injustice. Revenge was expressed through aggression against the organisation in terms of WorkCover complaints or legal action and through personal retaliation or revenge attributes against individuals perceived to be responsible. For example, three participants in the present study specifically talked about taking revenge on the perpetrators. One talked about hanging himself and writing a note to the manager in charge of investigating his complaint, so the manager would be first one to find his body. He wanted the manager to take some responsibility for the distress he was feeling and believed that this would bring that about. Another talked about shooting the HR manager and another about stabbing the HR manager. Despite these small numbers of participants expressing taking extreme retaliatory actions, they illustrate that perceptions of injustice can motivate extreme retaliatory ways of thinking in some individuals.

One participant, who I have called Adrian, talked freely about his past violent retaliatory actions when bullied at work as a young man, his time in the army and his breadth of knowledge about guns. Following our interview and after the audio tape had been turned off, he informed me that he would take a gun and shoot everyone at work if his worker's compensation stress claim was not accepted. When questioned further about this, he said that he knew that such violence was wrong and would not carry through with these thoughts if he thought about the consequences, but if backed into a corner he would snap and given his past actions would act out violently. After I turned the tape back on, he said the following:



I have had workplace bullying issues in other sites at other stages of my life, and in the past I tended to get into fights and I would get to the stage I would get into fights, and win or lose I didn't have any more problems. I remember 10 years ago when I use to do security at [name of organisation] this guy was doing little niggling things months and months and months of little niggling things ... One day I just grabbed him by the throat and thrust him up against the wall, you know to 5 cm off the ground, started squeezing the life out of him and told him what I thought, and clarified things. I showed them. I also get mad when backed into a corner like I have been. Well if you go from past actions, the history of violence, is if I snapped I would. Given my history I attacked a guy with a cricket bat, on another building site I was on I attacked another guy with a shovel and another one I grabbed around the neck. So if I get angry my sense will go out the window ... I don't know what I will do.  
(Adrian)

As described in this transcript, Adrian had a history of retaliatory behaviour in the past and had assaulted somebody 10 years ago when he had been bullied. However, he viewed himself as a victim and reported no knowing how he would react if his worker's compensation claim was rejected for the second time.

In the next transcript, John described increasing frustration over the way that the HR department appeared to be stalling over his pay and leave entitlements (these negative acts became part of his bullying allegation). He described having thoughts about exacting revenge on the HR manager because of the way he was being treated:

I had become so angry with them and depressed and just didn't care about any consequences and I had got to the point, where if it hadn't been for my partner, I firmly believe that I would be in jail today. Because I was going to go to the head office, pick up the human resources' manager and throw him off the balcony of the building, which is three stories high. That is how bad it had got. (John)

While John did not carry out retaliatory behaviours, the transcript above illustrates the types of actions he envisaged carrying out to take revenge on the human resources' manager. He reported that if it had not been for the actions of his partner preventing him from going to work, he would have carried out the retaliatory behaviour that he described. Both John and Adrian described wanting to carry out very serious actions against the person who they say was responsible for their predicament. Is it interesting to note that neither of these persons were the initial perpetrator responsible for the bullying, but were HR managers who had been responsible for investigating the complaint and became 'the bully' because they were not supporting the complainant in the way they wanted or expected. The theme of injustice appears to have moved away from the initial bullying, to the way that the complaint was managed by the organisation.

In the next section of transcript Ike wanted to punish the perpetrator by assigning him with the responsibility of his suicide. He described making plans to hang himself and to take revenge on the bully by ringing and having him be the first person to find his body:

That weekend I went home to bloody hang myself. I wrote a note and if it wasn't for my daughter I wouldn't be here now. I was going to ring him [the bully] to come down—hang me self in the rafters so when he come in he would see. (Ike)

Ike's story also illustrates the relationship between mental health and revenge behaviours, and the previous three transcripts illustrate the high levels of anger and feelings of injustice that all three participants (Ike, John and Adrian) experienced. However, the way they planned to deal with that anger and sense of injustice in terms of the extreme retaliatory behaviours was counterproductive.

Helen's story below illustrates the strong theme of injustice and unfairness that was pervasive throughout all of the participant's stories. Helen was an overseas worker who was bought over to Australia on a sponsored visa. She reported that she was kept as a 'slave' and made to carry out menial duties that were outside of her professional area. She reported to me that she had been forced to live with her employer as a maid, paid a subsistence wage and bullied by her employer. When I asked Helen why she viewed this as bullying she reported that she was repeatedly treated badly by her employer and her health had suffered and she had been told that it was bullying behaviour. Helen's transcript illustrates the strong sense of injustice that she felt as a result of her situation:

I want justice that is all. I really want justice because I have really been bullied in the office ... I have been locked up in the room, my daily routine was to carry the rubbish out and was treated like a servant. But they still want to hide it. It is very, very, nobody can have that kind of feeling, you know. How she has tortured me, she bullied me, very nasty things and it didn't happen in a while. There is no way they can get rid of me till I have proved what has happened ... It is very unfair. I feel that it is very unfair. I just want justice ... It is not the money issue. Everybody knew it is not the money issue; it is the fact that I want justice. Justice because if any other people like me ... If not for my own case. Because nobody knew the truth, what has happened. (Helen)

This transcript reflects the strong theme of injustice and unfairness that was pervasive throughout the stories of all the participants. It also reflects the 'search for the truth' that many participants were seeking when they engaged lawyers or made complaints to outside agencies. As Helen described, the search for justice was not about the money or the compensation. For her, and many other participants, a

worker's compensation pay-out was a sign that their story had been believed and that the organisation was made responsible.

Kale's story below also illustrates themes of fairness and justice. Kale believed that the behaviour he was subjected to was unfair and the investigation process and outcome was not fair because nothing happened,' and while he was effectively demoted, the bully was promoted. Further, while he was at the doctor's, his house was raided by the police and he was accused of stealing from work; something he denied and linked in to the bullying he was subjected to. The lack of justice that he perceives is contributing to make him seek legal advice:

It was so unfair. The simple fact that nothing happened. I complained about it but nothing happened. It wasn't right. I wrote a letter to the chairman and he passed it onto the CEO. He said he would do something about it and they sort of created a new job for her away from it me ... [but] she was promoted, and I was more or less demoted because of complaining about her behaviour ...

... the police rocked up with four squad cars, a video camera and a search warrant for computers that were reported to be stolen from work. It was horrible you can imagine. They won't even tell me who said that. This is a small town and they all saw what happened. To me, I am still fighting to get that information to say who made such statements. They refused to give it to me the first time but I have gone through freedom of information a second time. My reputation is ruined. I have moved to another town. It's so unfair. If I don't get any success out of this, the next step will be to get a serious lawyer and then I will take it to a next step. (Kale)

Kale's story reflects the sense of injustice he felt when the perpetrator was promoted and he considered that he was demoted. He also reports that he is still fighting' to get information about who informed the police he had stolen equipment in his house. He reports having to move to a different town and his reputation being

ruined and the unfairness of it all. He describes fighting for justice through freedom of information applications, talking to the police and his lawyer.

Again, the transcripts below illustrate the sense of unfairness and the quest for justice described by most of the study participants:

I lodged a complaint about the fairness about the process I have been put through. I haven't been given relevant information to defend myself; haven't been given clear reasons. I have no idea where I am. I think it's wrong.

(Megan)

As Megan reports, a lack of fairness in the process of the investigation (i.e. procedural justice) was a common concern of participants. Megan described a lack of procedural justice in terms of not being given the relevant information to defend herself. Other participants such as Lance, below, also described a lack of procedural justice that made him feel as though he had no rights at all:

They told me that in order for my complaint to be looked at I had to write a letter giving the other person permission to read my complaint; I did. However, I was not allowed to read her complaint. The whole thing was very one-sided. I had no rights at all. I think I have been denied acts of justice in terms of I had two reputable witnesses and they refused to comment. Now we are going through the Industrial Commission because they have victimised me because I made a complaint. (Lance)

As illustrated in Lance's transcript above, he reported feeling as though he had no rights and that the investigation was one-sided. He was not able to read the complaint against him, but the perpetrator was able to read his complaint. He specifically said that he believes that he has been denied justice and reported feeling victimised. Due to the lack of justice he was afforded internally within the organisation, he has taken his employer to the Industrial Relations' Commission.

Again, in the transcript below, Oona talks about feeling shattered by the lack of justice that was shown to her by the employer:

I was shattered. My expectation was that department would look after me, not because I am special, but through the principles of justice. I was absolutely shattered because my expectation was. I thought they would look after me and address this blatant bullying, but they just ignored it each time. It was too hard for them and I was the easy target for both the principal and the department. (Oona)

In Oona's transcript she describes the shock that she experienced when her expectations of fairness was not met in the manner in which the organisation managed her complaint. As with many of the participants, she had a belief that the organisation would look after her, and she was angry and 'shattered' when they did not live up to the sense of fairness that she expected.

The three extracts of transcripts below describe how the participants believed the organisation supported the perpetrator's version of events and describe the sense of unfairness common to all participants:

He said sit down, we have had our meeting and we have decided to support her [the perpetrator] one hundred per cent. It was like someone had hit me in the stomach. Well I thought they acted completely unreasonably, but I think that she convinced them at the meeting that I was over-reacting and they obviously didn't believe it for some reason. (Brenda)

That was very frustrating and I think the people who were the perpetrators knew that they were getting away with it. So I think to me it just seemed as though they were going to continue with this behaviour until I had to put in a stress claim and then had to. By the time they dealt with it, things had gotten so out of hand that I had actually left. I had actually gone on stress leave. (Heather)

That was the whole unfairness of it all. In that short-term I had gone from the top to the bottom and being asked if I wanted to work there—it just blew me away. (George)

The extracts cited above describe a common sense of unfairness expressed by all participants. As described above, the unfairness or injustice was linked strongly to one of the reasons participants took legal action against the organisation or put in a stress claim. For example, in Heather's transcript above, she reported that they were going to continue with this behaviour until I had to put in a stress claim'. Many participants reported claiming worker's compensation and going on stress leave as a result of both the bullying, the lack of intervention and strong sense of injustice in relation to the behaviours they were being subjected to by the organisation.

### **3.6 Theme 4: Mental and Physical Repercussions**

The negative health consequences of workplace bullying have been long established in previous research. Therefore, it is not surprising that over 90 percent of participants in the current study described significant psychological and physical health problems that they believed were caused by the bullying. It appeared that these mental health problems were exacerbated by the sense of injustice felt by participants when their initial complaint was not managed in the manner they thought it would be.

As illustrated in the transcripts below, mental health problems included participants reporting symptoms of depression, poor self-esteem, post-traumatic stress symptoms, suicidal ideology and anxiety, as well as physical stress-related symptoms. The following excerpts illustrate the types of concerns that were reported:

That weekend I went home to bloody hang myself. I wrote a note and if it wasn't for my daughter I wouldn't be here now. I had a nice piece of white

rope. I had it all tied up and ready to go. But my daughter, she knew something was wrong and rang up and came around. (Ike)

I have never felt that out of control before. I felt it was really unprofessional. ... I felt like I wanted to go and kill myself. So I went home and I actually took 40 Panadeine Forte. Nothing happened actually, didn't die, obviously it wasn't enough and the next day I went, I have a really good relationship with my doctor and told her what I had done. (Brenda)

Both Ike's and Brenda's transcripts above illustrate a severe degree of distress experienced by both of them. Both of them were suicidal as a result of the behaviours that they were exposed to. In Brenda's case she took an overdose of tablets, following a particularly significant incident at work. However, her suicide was unsuccessful. Ike's level of distress culminated in a serious plan to hang himself that was premeditated and well planned (unlike Brenda, whose attempt at overdose was spontaneous). Ike had selected a place to hang himself, had bought rope, written a suicide note and reported that the only thing that prevented him from carrying out his plan was a phone call from his daughter. Both of these examples illustrate the severity of the mental health problems experienced by some of the participants in the study.

This next excerpt of a transcript reflects the interrelationship between psychological symptoms and the physical symptoms that were described by some participants:

I just felt absolutely horrible. My head was going to burst. I felt sick in the stomach. I went home that night and I was very emotional and I was very sick and I thought I was going to have another heart attack. That's how bad I felt. I hardly slept that night ... Whenever I went to the psychiatrist or psychologist I would break down and end up sick for days. I have never had that sort of



reaction in my life and I have dealt with major disagreements, abusive customers or staff. That was one of my fortes. (James)

When I came home and my son came around and saw how devastated I was ... he got the doctor in and the doctor gave me an injection to stop the vomiting and calm me down, which went on for a week ... The doctor told me to go on work cover and not go back. (Gloria)

James reflected how he felt physically sick and emotionally distraught. Gloria also described some of the physical repercussions of a bullying incident that resulted in her seeing her medical doctor. Many of the participants required both medical and psychiatric assistance. James described his mental and physical state as a stark contrast to how he viewed himself prior to the bullying that he experienced. He reported that one of his strengths was being able to cope with major disagreements, abusive customers or staff and reported being proud of this. However, since the bullying experiences, he found that he was not coping mentally or physically and was seeing both a medical doctor and a psychiatrist on a regular basis.

The next participant, Eryn, describes how she developed a gambling addiction as the result of the treatment that she experienced at work. She was admitted to a psychiatric hospital because her level of depression and gambling could not be managed and a year later she still required regular outpatient care:

I can't begin to tell you the effect that it had on me as a person. I ended up at (psychiatric hospital) for six weeks in hospital. I would sit and cry and eat and watch TV. Probably 24 hours a day. I was very distrustful of people. I got to the stage where I didn't want to see anyone, didn't want to talk to anyone, didn't even want to go out to my letter box. Before I actually went on sick leave I found what I was doing was leaving work, going to the pokies on the way home and spending so much money on the pokies because the way I was feeling was that I was a loser. People would go to the pokies knowing that

they are not going to win, so what I was doing was just reinforcing that feeling. You're a loser, you are going to lose. I don't think I know that I am out of that deep dark hole yet, I still go to a hospital for treatment once a week. I still am very depressed I lost my job, my friends I had there and social occasions, Christmas time ... Before this, I was very outgoing, head of the social club committee, organising Christmas parties, karaoke, all the social events for the organisation. I would never have gambled. Before this I was very much into sport and playing netball still. (Eryn)

Eryn contrasts the outgoing and social person she was prior to the bullying and reported that following the bullying experience she became withdrawn, did not want to socialise with anyone and developed a severe gambling addiction. In outlining the development of a gambling addiction as a way of coping with the bullying, Eryn's story highlights the widespread ramifications bullying can have on a person's mental health.

In the next transcript, Lorelie highlights poor self-esteem and loss of confidence and also describes feeling unsure about how her own behaviour would be interpreted:

My self-esteem and confidence were seriously blocked. It was a very personal attack and that I found this damaged my capacity to feel confident and comfortable with other people because initially I wasn't sure how my behaviour was being interpreted. Also I was very teary, very depressed for quite some time and very highly sensitive in that regard. Somebody would look at me and I would burst into tears. (Lorelie)

Lorelie's description of depression and loss of confidence was a common theme amongst participants in the study. Some, like Lorelie, were not sure how to behave or react to the behaviour that they were experiencing and questioned their own understanding of events. As illustrated in all transcripts cited above, most participants

were seeing, or had past contact with either their General Medical Practitioner (GP), psychologist, psychiatrist or a counsellor because of the mental health effects of the bullying. Many were suffering *both* mental health and physical ramifications and were seeing more than one health provider. Participants who had their worker's compensation complaint accepted had been given formal psychiatric diagnosis.

Seeing a mental health provider and medical doctor who believed their story and provided support meant that for the first time the bully targets had an advocate. Someone would speak up for them, would provide support, would document their side of the story, write medical reports on their behalf and provide them with assistance when needed. The initial link with medical and psychological services was often the first advocate the participants had.

### **3.7 Theme 5: Advocacy**

The fifth major theme to emerge from the interviews was *advocacy*. Due to the initial impact of the bullying on participants' health, the first advocates that over half of the participants turned to was their general practitioner. From there they were often referred to more specialist services such as psychiatric or psychology services. When participants started to feel more in control of their mental and physical health they began to search for other advocates. These included gaining assistance from the trade union, legal assistance, or through making a formal complaint of discrimination through the SAEOC, HREOC or a formal bullying complainant through Safe Work SA.

Georgia's story illustrates the number of agencies that participants often went to in order to gain support. The advocacy she obtained ranged from her doctor to the union, a psychologist, psychiatrist, WorkCover and the SAEOC:

On the Monday my son took me in to the city to the union and I told them what had happened and they advised me not to go near the place because I had a workplace injury. The psychologist, the first one I went to, on a little bit of yellow paper she wrote down, 'you have done nothing wrong' and I put that on my bed head ... I was filling out forms for WorkCover, the union, Equal Opportunity, so all of my life was devoted to that. I was disappointed with Equal Opportunity to the degree that they did not ever call witnesses. Why don't they? They just said that they couldn't help me that there wasn't enough evidence it was my age. They didn't really even try ... I had put in a compensation claim ... That was logged with workers' compensation and they said yes, I had a case ... In the end WorkCover made the decision you can't return to a dangerous workplace. (Gloria)

I went and saw a counsellor because I wasn't dealing with the way that I was being treated. I forget the name of the place I went but the lady was very helpful and she said that you have got to let your principal know formally... So at that stage I went and saw the union. I joined the union but because I had joined after the incidents had started, they could only give me some verbal advice and couldn't act for me. (Herman)

Gloria and Herman's transcripts above illustrate the number of different agencies they went to for support. As with some other participants, Gloria was disappointed with the EOC because they did not take up her case and Herman reported that the union was unable to act for him because he only joined the union after the bullying started.

For a number of participants their trade union was an important source of advocacy:

The union provided me with a lot of really good information in terms of preparing for the mediation meeting, in terms of understanding my work rights, those sorts of things and were very supportive in assisting me in terms

of coming to meetings, offering comment and things at meetings in support.  
(Lorelie)

In the transcript above, Lorelie outlines the sorts of assistance the union provided to her including information regarding her work rights, helping her to prepare for mediations and supporting her in meetings. For other participants, WorkCover was seen as a powerful advocate because in determining whether the participant was eligible to claim worker's compensation, the agency would assess whether the poor health of the participant had been caused by the workplace. Participants viewed this as WorkCover independently investigating their bullying allegations. While the participants below talked about being stressed, one of the reasons they accessed WorkCover was because the employer was making matters worse by the way they were managing the situation, and WorkCover was viewed as being able to independently investigate the complaint and validate their perception of bullying:

I ended up going on WorkCover. I think I was very, very stressed by the initial bullying but the way they handled it made it worse and that is when I just went off [on WorkCover] because I could see the way they were dealing with it. They weren't really interested in sorting out this intimidation that was going on. The doctor said you just can't keep on taking sick leave, you either go on WorkCover because it is work-related or you move. (Megan)

I went to WorkCover because all the other complaints that I made at work weren't getting anywhere. Even when I made a formal complaint the investigations didn't work because they weren't investigations, they were just in my opinion covering their butt so that legally there wasn't any recall for them. (Debbie)

While WorkCover is not an advocate as such (in that the agency does not actively support either party involved in the dispute, as a lawyer or union might), the

independent nature of WorkCover meant that a number of participants viewed WorkCover as an advocate. These transcripts cited above illustrate how a WorkCover claim was used by participants as a means of legitimising their claim of bullying. This was because the cause of the participants' injury (mental health problems) would be independently investigated, and their allegations of being bullied would be validated. For example, Debbie, cited above, outlined how she claimed WorkCover because her internal complaints at work 'weren't getting anywhere' and therefore an investigation by WorkCover would help her to resolve the matter.

### **3.8 Theme 6: Worker's Compensation Claim**

Sixty three percent of participants submitted a Workers Compensation claim (three participants' did not specify whether they had submitted a claim or not). As illustrated in the previous theme of *advocacy*, it appeared that the decision to apply for worker's compensation (WorkCover) was related to both poor mental or physical health caused by the bullying that the participant was exposed to, and also to the frustration of the organisation not acting on the allegations of bullying. These findings are not unexpected and support research where a negative relationship with the workplace is a significant influence in an injured worker's decision to lodge a worker's compensation claim (Roberts & Markel, 2001; Rosenman et al., 2000; Winefield et al., 2010).

In the current study, it appeared that a participant's decision to apply for WorkCover often occurred after a particular incident that was 'the straw that broke the camel's back', or when their relationship with the organisation had deteriorated significantly. A small number of participants talked specifically about not wanting to apply for WorkCover as it was seen as a career-limiting move, or went against the

perception of a good employee, but said changed their minds after they felt they were not being heard or the bullying allegations were not being taken seriously, or the organisation was treating them unfairly in relation to their complaint. The following transcript illustrates this well:

First of all, I am 60 years of age. I have been in the workforce since I was 15, so effectively for 40 years I have never had a WorkCover claim. Never wanted one. So I didn't want to take WorkCover as an option and I refused it initially, but things escalated with the problems I was having at work to a point where I had no option. By this stage I had really fallen apart and so I went back to my doctor and said now I have got to take WorkCover, I've got to because I am just not well, and I am not getting paid, and HR [the bully was the head of HR] is making it worse, and I have to do something. (Rhyse)

As illustrated by Rhyse's transcript, applying for WorkCover was viewed as a last resort and Rhyse prided himself on having never made a WorkCover claim in his 40 years of working life. He reported that he only applied for WorkCover as a last resort and reported that he had no option because he had fallen apart.

These transcripts cited below also describe the theme of injustice that preceded participants' decisions to lodge a WorkCover claim:

Hence the CEO just totally one hundred per cent stuck up for (sic). Never even asked me one question about the incident, never asked me how loud she had screamed, what it was over or anything. He showed absolutely no concerns for me that I had been verbally abused ... They didn't care about how I felt or what I had gone through ... and I walked out and went off to the doctor and got a WorkCover certificate. (Nora)

Nora's transcript describes the link between taking out a WorkCover claim and believing that the CEO did not care about her. Her sense of unfairness and poor interpersonal justice is strong, and Nora believed that she had been treated badly by

the CEO, who appeared uninterested in her version of events. Similarly to Rhyse, below, she believed that one of her few options was to apply for stress leave through WorkCover. Rhyse described a similar situation and sentiment of WorkCover being the last resort:

That was very frustrating and I think the people who were the perpetrators knew that they were getting away with it. So I think to me it just seemed as though they were going to continue with this behaviour until I had to put in a stress claim. By the time they dealt with it, things had gotten so out of hand that I had actually left. I had actually gone on stress leave. (Rhyse)

From Rhys's perspective, the perpetrators would continue to get away with the behaviour until he put in a stress claim, and their behaviour was stopped by an outside agency. From this perspective a successful stress claim vindicated his perspective of the bullying. However, as illustrated below, not all applications for WorkCover were accepted: Three participants had their WorkCover claims rejected and were appealing the outcome. It is interesting to note the meaning of the rejection for those participants. Larry perceived the rejection of his claim as WorkCover approving of the bullying and George reported that while WorkCover acknowledged his stress injury, they determined that the manager had acted reasonably—again rejecting his version of events:

The ruling was that [the manager] acted fair and just, and I said to the girl so ~~–fair and just?~~” and she said ~~–yes~~” because they investigated me and the other people involved. ~~–Ok~~, then you are saying that you approve of workplace bullying?” I never lied. I'm going to keep going. I'm going to show them that that they are wrong in the way they treated me. (Larry)

So there was no contact to see how I felt, was I doing ok wishing me the best or whatever and with that I rang WorkCover and submitted a claim on the 1<sup>st</sup> of August. So it was roughly two weeks after the event. WorkCover took the



claim and processed it and they sent me to a psychiatrist and a psychologist and they agreed I had suffered a work-related injury but the reason they got out of it was that they decided that management had acted in a reasonable manner ... so the claim was initially rejected. I said I would fight it on principal, and we have continued on and there is no argument to the fact that I have suffered an injury due to the work discussion, it was all down to this word reasonable ... Weeks ago WorkCover said that they had reassessed the situation and they were prepared to pay the claim. (George)

I went through this for months and months and then they called me into WorkCover and said I am sorry but we can't accept your claim. They virtually said to me go away. It had been like a couple of months and I thought WorkCover ... well I just went to pieces. I completely folded up, I just totally disintegrated. I think the Case Manager kind of knew that I was in the right but she said there was a bit of a grey area. So she said to me that I can appeal and she said it to me about five times. There is an appeal process. I said I could not be bothered ... About a week later I thought no I have got a bit of energy back and I appealed and I won. (Frank)

The transcripts above reflect the strong push for participants to view a successful WorkCover claim as vindicating their perception of the treatment they received as unjust and inappropriate. For example, Larry perceived the rejection of his WorkCover claim as WorkCover believing that the bully acted in a fair and just manner. Larry was determined to keep going with legal action against the organisation in order to prove his interpretation of events was correct. In a similar manner, George's transcript suggests that initially WorkCover found that the bully acted in a reasonable manner. However, after appealing the decision, Larry said that WorkCover reassessed his claim and was prepared to pay him compensation. It is interesting that in the final transcript, Frank reported that although his claim had

initially been rejected, his case manager at WorkCover suggested that he appeal the outcome, and upon appeal Frank's WorkCover claim was accepted.

### **3.9 Discussion and Conclusions: Qualitative Study**

The results of the qualitative study support more empirical research that has described the antecedents of workplace bullying as a combination of both target and perpetrator characteristics (Einarsen, 1999; Zapf, 1999) and poor work environment (Hoel & Salin, 2003; Salin, 2003, Avergold, 2009). All participants in the current study reported a poor work environment including a strong social environment that marginalised the target and an industrial environment that was fraught with conflict, lack of policy, poor job descriptions, job insecurity, changes in job role and inflexible work practices. The characteristics of about a third of the participants at times, also contributed to the bullying, either through their actions (which either instigated or escalated the conflict) or through the participant having personal characteristics that were targeted by the perpetrators. About a third also reported either an autocratic management or poor support from management.

These findings support the OHSW approach to preventing and managing bullying (Caponecchia & Wyatt, 2007; Caponecchia & Wyatt, 2009; Dollard & Knott, 2004), and highlight the importance of taking the background of the complaint into account when assessing potential risk factors for bullying in the workplace.

The range of behaviours labelled as bullying by participants support studies that suggest that employee accounts of workplace bullying do not always meet the definition of bullying found in policy documents and research definitions (Liefoghe & Mackenzie-Davey, 2001; Liefoghe & Mackenzie-Davey, 2010; Liefoghe & Olafsoon, 1999). However, the reactions of all the participants highlight the impact

that perceptions of injustice can have when complaints of workplace bullying are not perceived to be treated seriously or fairly by an organisation.

The behaviours described as bullying by participants could be placed into one of three categories. Firstly, predatory bullying behaviours, where the participant was targeted without provocation as a result of a particular characteristic, or where an extremely authoritarian manager targeted all subordinates in an unreasonable way. For example, the participant who was a transsexual woman and the participant who had a visual impairment (see Angela's story and Debbie's story). The predatory bullying aimed at these participants took place in a background where the organisation tolerated the behaviour or normalised it, or where the target was made the scapegoat (see Erin's story). Predatory bullying has been described in early studies (Einarsen, 1999); however, the difference between predatory and dispute-related bullying does not appear to be differentiated in most workplace bullying research, with the vast majority of studies addressing bullying as a unitary phenomenon. While a number of studies have identified conflict escalation as paramount to the bullying process (Zapf & Gross, 2001), the current study found that predatory bullying did not necessarily begin with a conflict, but was a targeted aggressive behaviour against the participant, with little or no provocation or prior conflict on the part of the complainant. For example, sexual harassment, racial discrimination/harassment and disability discrimination/harassment all fit within this framework of predatory bullying without provocation.

The other type of bullying identified was dispute-related bullying where the bullying was the result of an escalated conflict. In the current study the complainant's behaviour can be seen to contribute to the conflict in a number of cases (for example,

see Brenda's story), and at times the boundary between victim and perpetrator was blurred. Dispute-related bullying fits with the conflict-escalation approach to explaining bullying where the starting point of bullying is typically a critical incident or trigger, and the initial low-level conflict may not necessarily meet the definitions of bullying (Zapf & Gross, 2001), but may be subjectively defined as bullying by participants who are intrinsically involved in the conflict. It appeared that this conflict becomes named as bullying when the participant felt that the conflict they were being exposed to was unfair and where they could do little to resolve the conflict on their own.

While dispute-related bullying (Zapf and Gross, 2001) and predatory bullying (Einarsen, 2009) have been identified in the previous research, a third type of bullying was identified in the current study. This occurred where the organisation or organisation's representative (i.e. HR manager or executive director) was named a bully when they failed to support the target (for example, see Carole's story). Participants in the current study appeared to view the lack of support from the organisation as bullying from the organisation or the organisation's representative. When this occurred, the focus of the bullying complaint moved from the initial individual perpetrator to a complaint about how the organisation (through their representative) was bullying the complainant. Previous studies have viewed this as an escalation of the conflict (Zapf & Gross, 2001), but it can also be viewed as separate from the initial dispute, in that the organisation (or their representative) becomes the subject of the complaint and is held responsible for the behaviour. Subsequent legal action taken by the complainant is against the organisation and organisational representatives. Retaliatory behaviours in the form of CWBs were aimed against the

organisation or the organisational representative, rather than the initial bully perpetrator.

One of the reasons for these retaliatory CWBs was the strong sense of injustice that was perceived by the participants in this study. Initially, the injustice related to the actions of the individual perpetrator, which were considered unfair. However, when the organisation failed to address the bullying complaint in a manner that was expected, the participants' perceptions of injustice increased and the organisation became to focus of CWBs. A significant behaviour that was common to the majority of the participants was lodging a worker's compensation claim, (over sixty percent of participants lodged claims), which was viewed both as a retaliatory CWB (it was against the organisation's interests to have a claim lodged against them) and was also viewed as an entitlement following a workplace (psychological) injury. A successful worker's compensation claim was viewed by participants as validating their perception that they had been subjected to inappropriate behaviours that had caused them harm.

These results support a number of studies that have examined how employees respond to perceived unfairness within an organisation through counterproductive and retaliatory behaviours (Starlicki & Folger, 1997; Fox et al., 2001; Tripp & Bias, 2010). These results also fit with other research that has suggested that employees are more likely to claim workers' compensation when they feel the organisation has not supported them and when they have been treated unfairly (Winefield, Saebel & Winefield, 2010).

While often discussed in isolation, the results of the qualitative study draw attention to the importance of utilising *both* an OHSW approach to workplace

bullying, taking into account the antecedents to bullying complaints as OHSW risk factors, as well as taking a conflict-management approach to prevent escalation of conflicts into bullying. Integrating conflict-management systems and approaches into workplace bullying policies and complaint procedures could serve to prevent conflicts being framed as workplace bullying, or indeed escalating to the point where they become bullying.

While identifying potential environmental risk factors is important in preventing bullying, these results draw attention to the importance of organisations taking into account a target's sense of injustice early in the complaint process, even before a situation is framed as bullying. The major theme of injustice found in the results suggests that perceptions of increasing injustice served to inflame conflict situations and alienate a complainant from the organisation. Furthermore, results suggest that as perceptions of injustice increase, the complainant looks for more adversarial ways to increase their influence in addressing their complaint, thus making the organisation more vulnerable to CWBs or revenge behaviours such as legal action in the form of workers' compensation claims or external complaints to government, anti-discrimination or OHSW jurisdictions.

## **Chapter 4: Results of the Quantitative Stage of the Complainants’ Study**

### **4.1 Overview**

This quantitative part of the Complainants’ Study examines the types of behaviours participants reported being subjected to, and the impact of bullying on their mental health and commitment to the organisation. The interrelationship between participants’ perceptions of organisational justice, their commitment to their organisation and their mental health is also examined in this study.

The nature of the study participants and the materials utilised in this study have previously been described in sections 2.5 and 2.6 of this thesis. All data were analysed using SPSS for Windows statistical package. Prior to presentation of the results, the initial data screening will be outlined. Preliminary analysis addressing the initial data screening will be presented followed by descriptive statistics and tests of the major hypotheses.

#### **4.1.1 Initial data screening**

##### ***4.1.1.1 Assumptions of normality***

Most parametric statistics assume that the variables used in the analysis have come from a normal distribution. Initial data analysis was carried out in order to ascertain whether they met the assumptions of normality. Variables were examined using the SPSS Frequencies command, which provided both a measure of skewness and standard error of skewness. The skewness value obtained was divided by the standard error of skewness in order to obtain a standard score. Standard scores over

2.58 resulted in a rejection of the assumption of normality at  $p < .01$  (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1989). The variables *perceptions of procedural justice*, *perceptions of informational justice*, *evaluation of organisational justice* and *perceptions of outcome justice* were found to be skewed and reflected a significant violation of the assumption of normality.

As recommended by Tabachnick and Fidell (1989), square-root transformations were carried out on these variables and the resultant distribution subsequently conformed to the assumptions of normality.

Descriptive statistics are presented from untransformed variables in order to provide means and standard deviations that are meaningful. Inferential analyses were carried out and are reported for variables that either meet the assumptions of normality or that were transformed in order that they met such assumptions. An alpha level of 0.05 was used for all statistical tests.

## **4.2 Descriptive Statistics**

### **4.2.1 Negative behaviours at work**

As illustrated in Table 4.1, all participants reported a number of negative acts occurring to them over the previous 12 months. All participants reported being exposed to at least one negative act on a daily or weekly basis, which suggested that all participants had been bullied according to the definition of bullying provided by Einerson, Zapf, Hoel and Cooper (2003), who highlight ‘repeated acts’ as being necessary for a negative behaviour to be labelled bullying. Consistent with other studies (Einarsen & Raknes, 1997; Zapf, 1999), there were very few participants who reported violence, or threats of physical violence towards them by the perpetrator.



Table 4.1  
*Participant Reports of Specific Negative Workplace Behaviours (N = 44)*

<b>Negative Act</b>	<b>Never %</b>	<b>Now and Then %</b>	<b>Monthly %</b>	<b>Weekly %</b>	<b>Daily</b>
Someone withholding information that affects your performance	15.9 (n = 7)	20.5 (n = 9)	4.5 (n = 2)	25.0 (n = 11)	34.1 (n = 15)
Being humiliated or ridiculed in connection with your work	4.5 (n = 2)	20.5 (n = 9)	20.5 (n = 9)	29.5 (n = 15)	25.0 (n = 11)
Being ordered to do work below your level of competence	34.2 (n = 15)	22.7 (n = 10)	6.8 (n = 3)	9.1 (n = 4)	27.3 (n = 12)
Having key areas of responsibility removed or replaced with more trivial or unpleasant tasks	15.9 (n = 7)	34.1 (n = 15)	9.1 (n = 4)	15.9 (n = 7)	25.0 (n = 11)
Spreading gossip and rumours about you	20.5 (n = 9)	18.2 (n = 8)	2.3 (n = 1)	15.9 (n = 7)	43.2 (n = 19)
Being ignored, excluded or sent to Coventry	18.2 (n = 8)	13.6 (n = 6)	4.5 (n = 2)	20.5 (n = 9)	43.2 (n = 19)
Having insulting or offensive remarks made about your person (i.e. habits and background), your attitudes or your private life	25.0 (n = 11)	18.2 (n = 8)	11.4 (n = 5)	18.2 (n = 8)	27.3 (n = 12)
Being shouted at or being the target of spontaneous anger (or rage)	20.5 (n = 9)	29.1 (n = 13)	11.4 (n = 5)	34.1 (n = 15)	4.1 (n = 2)
Intimidating behaviour such as finger pointing, invasion of personal space, shoving, blocking/barring the way	27.3 (n = 12)	34.1 (n = 15)	6.8 (n = 3)	20.5 (n = 9)	11.4 (n = 5)
Hints or signals from	18.2	29.5	13.6	22.7	15.9

others that you should quit your job	(n = 8)	(n = 13)	(n = 10)	(n = 6)	(n = 7)
Threats of violence or physical abuse	72.7 (n = 32)	20.5 (n = 9)	2.3 (n = 1)	4.5 (n = 2)	0 (n = 0)
Repeated reminders of your errors or mistakes	25.0 (n = 11)	20.5 (n = 9)	20.5 (n = 9)	18.2 (n = 8)	15.9 (n = 7)
Being ignored or facing a hostile reaction when you approach	6.8 (n = 3)	20.5 (n = 9)	13.6 (n = 6)	20.5 (n = 9)	38.6 (n = 17)
Persistent criticism of your work and effort	18.2 (n = 8)	11.4 (n = 5)	11.4 (n = 5)	27.3 (n = 12)	31.8 (n = 14)
Having your views and opinions ignored	6.8 (n = 3)	11.4 (n = 5)	9.1 (n = 4)	25.0 (n = 11)	47.7 (n = 21)
Practical jokes played by people you don't get along with	84.1 (n = 37)	6.8 (n = 12)	2.3 (n = 1)	4.5 (n = 2)	2.3 (n = 1)
Being given tasks with unreasonable deadlines or impossible targets or deadlines	29.5 (n = 13)	18.2 (n = 8)	6.8 (n = 3)	18.2 (n = 8)	27.3 (n = 12)
Having allegations made against you	15.9 (n = 7)	15.9 (n = 7)	20.5 (n = 9)	18.2 (n = 8)	29.5 (n = 13)
Having allegations made against you	22.7 (n = 10)	11.4 (n = 5)	4.5 (n = 2)	15.9 (n = 7)	45.5 (n = 20)
Pressure not to claim something that by right you are entitled to (e.g. sick leave, holiday entitlement, travel expenses)	38.6 (n = 17)	22.7 (n = 10)	11.4 (n = 5)	13.6 (n = 6)	13.6 (n = 6)
Being the subject of excessive teasing and sarcasm	50.0 (n = 22)	9.1 (n = 4)	4.5 (n = 5)	22.7 (n = 10)	13.6 (n = 6)
Being exposed to an unmanageable workload	27.3 (n = 12)	20.5 (n = 9)	6.8 (n = 3)	13.6 (n = 6)	31.8 (n = 14)

As illustrated below in Table 4.2, person-orientated bullying was the most frequent type of bullying reported by participants. This suggests that the main types of behaviours that participants were exposed to were personal attacks as opposed to attacks on their work or ability to carry out their work. That physical intimidation was the least likely type of behaviour to be reported may reflect the more subtle types of bullying behaviours that were commonly reported by participants.

Table 4.2  
Mean Scores on the NAQ-R Subscales and Total NAQ-R

NAQ-R Subscale	Mean (SD)
<b>Physical intimidation</b>	6.65 (2.43)
<b>Person-orientated bullying</b>	36.34 (11.74)
<b>Work-orientated bullying</b>	21.97 (6.73)
<b>Total NAQ-R</b>	68.61 (19.92)

Despite all participants indicating on the NAQ-R that they had been exposed to a number of repeated negative acts in the last 12 months, as illustrated below in Table 4.3, four participants reported that in the last 12 months they had *never been bullied* or were *rarely bullied* according to the specific definition of workplace bullying provided<sup>1</sup>, and around 70 per cent of participants reported that they had been

<sup>1</sup> Bullying was defined as a situation where repeated unreasonable behaviour is directed towards an employee or a group of employees, that a reasonable person would expect to victimise, humiliate, undermine or threaten employee or employees to whom the behaviour is directed. We do not refer to a one-off incident as bullying. This definition is taken from the South Australian Occupational Health and Safety Act 55A (1).

bullied *at least* several times per month over the previous 12 months. These results suggest that some participants may not have interpreted negative interactions as bullying, given that they reported they had not been bullied or rarely bullied, despite indicating that they had been subjected to negative acts in the workplace on the NAQ-R. Furthermore, given that all participants had been identified as being targets of workplace bullying in order to participate in the study, the fact that four participants indicated they had never or rarely been bullied according to the definition provided was interesting. The discrepancies in these results reflect the differences in prevalence rates that are common in the bullying literature, depending on how workplace bullying is measured.

Table 4.3  
*Frequency of Bullying Experienced by Participants*

<b>Percentage and number of participants</b>	
Have not been bullied	6.8 (n = 3)
Rarely bullied	2.3 (n = 1)
Bullied now and then	18.2 (n = 8)
Bullied several times a month	11.4 (n = 5)
Bullied several times a week	29.5 (n = 13)
Bullied almost daily	29.5 (n = 13)

Pearson product-moment correlations between the total score on the NAQ-R and the amount of bullying reported was strong ( $r = .64, p < .01$ ), indicating that high scores on the NAQ-R were strongly associated with the amount of bullying that participants experienced.

As illustrated in Table 4.4, most participants reported that they were bullied by their direct line supervisor, with 45 per cent of participants reporting that they had been bullied by a senior manager. Twenty-six participants reported that they had been bullied by more than one person, accounting for the greater overall N reported. It is interesting to note that 11 per cent of participants reported that they were the victims of upward bullying; that is, being bullied by a subordinate.

Table 4.4  
*Who Were the Bullies?*

Who bullied you	N (percentage)
<b>Direct line supervisor</b>	27 (61.4)
<b>Senior manager</b>	20 (45.5)
<b>Colleague</b>	18 (40.9)
<b>Subordinate</b>	5 (11.4)

#### 4.2.2 Mental health

As illustrated in Table 4.5, responses on the DASS indicated that most of the participants reported significant stress, anxiety and depression symptoms. While a small number of participants (11.4 per cent,  $n = 5$ ) had a depression score on the DASS that fell within the *normal* to *mild* range of depression symptoms, the majority of participants (88.6 per cent,  $n = 39$ ) had depression scores on the DASS that ranged

from *moderate* to *extremely severe* depressive symptoms. Fifty per cent of participants (n = 23) recorded depression scores in the *extremely severe* range.

Similarly, a minority of participants (18.2 per cent, n = 8) reported anxiety in the *normal* to *mild* range, with the majority of participants reporting anxiety in the *moderate* to *extremely severe* range (80.1, n = 36). Over half the participants recorded anxiety scores in the *extremely severe* range.

A minority of participants reported stress scores in the *normal* to *mild* range of stress (11.3 per cent, n = 5) and the majority reported stress scores within the *moderate* to *extremely severe* range of stress (84.1 per cent, n = 37). Forty-three per cent of the sample (n = 19) recorded stress scores in the *extremely severe* range.

Table 4.5  
*Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS) Scores*

DASS Severity Ratings	Depression	Anxiety	Stress
Normal range	9.1 (n = 4)	9.1 (n = 4)	4.5 (n = 2)
Mild range	2.3 (n = 1)	9.1 (n = 4)	6.8 (n = 3)
Moderate range	13.6 (n = 6)	20.5 (n = 9)	15.9 (n = 7)
Severe range	13.6 (n = 6)	6.8 (n = 3)	25.0 (n = 11)
Extremely severe range	61.4 (n = 27)	54.5 (n = 24)	43.2 (n = 19)

### 4.2.3 Perceptions of organisational justice

Three measures of organisational justice were assessed. These were *interpersonal justice*, *procedural justice* and *distributive justice*. The mean scores are provided below in Table 4.6. Scores could potentially range from 4 to 20 for *distributive justice*, 7 to 35 for *procedural justice* and between 9 and 45 for *interpersonal justice*. The higher the scores, the greater sense of justice expressed by participants. Items with missing values were excluded from analysis.

Table 4.6  
*Means and Standard Deviations of Participants' Organisational Justice Scores*

Type of Justice	Mean (SD)
Interpersonal (n = 42)	13.6 (6.6)
Procedural (n = 42)	13.6 (7.8)
Distributive (n = 43)	6.1 (3.6)

### 4.2.4 Workers' compensation claims

Sixty-three per cent of participants had submitted a worker's compensation claim (n = 28) due to a psychological injury obtained as a result of workplace bullying to which they had been exposed. Twenty-nine per cent of participants did not submit a worker's compensation claim (n = 13), and three participants did not indicate whether they had submitted a worker's compensation claim or not.

#### 4.2.5 Organisational commitment

Two measures of *organisation commitment* were assessed. These were *affective commitment* and *continuous commitment*. Means and standard deviations are reported below in Table 4.7. Higher scores reflect greater commitment to the organisation, and lower scores reflect a greater propensity to leave the organisation. Items with missing values were excluded from analysis

Table 4.7  
*Means and Standard Deviations of Participants' Organisational Commitment Scores*

<b>Organisational Commitment</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean (SD)</b>
Affective commitment	43	24.4 (9.7)
Continuous commitment	41	37.2 (12.2)

#### 4.2.6 Revenge

Scores on the Vengeance Scale ranged from 26 to 99, with a mean of 63 and a standard deviation of 21. No significant relationships were found between scores on the Vengeance Scale and any of the other variables, and therefore the Vengeance Scale scores were not used in any subsequent analysis.

#### 4.2.7 Relationships between the variables

Table 4.8 illustrates the Pearson product-moment correlations between the three NAQ-R subscales of *work-orientated bullying*, *person-orientated bullying* and *physical intimidation*, total NAQ-R score and measures of *depression*, *anxiety*,



*stress, continuous organisation commitment and procedural and distributive justice* scores.

Correlations between *physical intimidation* and *person-orientated bullying* subscales of the NAQ-R and *perception of procedural and distributive justice* were statistically significant and moderately strong, indicating that the greater the level of physical intimidation and person-orientated bullying, the worse the perception of fairness in the way the complaint was managed and the poorer the perception of justice in terms of the complaint outcome. Surprisingly, the relationship between the NAQ-R *work-orientated bullying* subscale and measures of organisational justice were only significant for *distributive justice*, but did not reach significance in the relationship with *procedural justice*.

The only variable to show a significant relationship with *continuous organisation commitment* was the total NAQ-R score. This relationship suggested that participants' commitment to stay working in the organisation decreased as the number of negative acts perpetrated against them increased.

A significant correlation between total NAQ-R scores and depression and anxiety scores on the DASS was found, but the relationship between the total NAQ-R and DASS-*stress* score was not statistically significant. However, a significant relationship was found between *depression, anxiety and stress* scores and *perceptions of organisational justice*. This relationship indicates the higher the *depression, anxiety and stress*, the less positive the participants' perception of the way their complaint was managed by the organisation (*procedural justice*) and the outcome of their complaint (*distributive justice*).

Table 4.8

*Pearson Product-Moment Correlations between, NAQ-R Subscales and Total NAQ-R and DASS Anxiety, Depression and Stress Scores, Organisational Commitment and Perceptions of Organisational Justice*

	5	6	7	8	9	10
<b>1. Physical intimidation</b>	.13	.23	.17	-.17	-.42**	-.40**
<b>2. Person-orientated bullying</b>	.18	.29	.01	-.29	-.33*	-.40**
<b>3. Work-oriented bullying</b>	.22	.34*	.03	-.30	-.27	-.34*
<b>4. Total NAQ-R</b>	.21	.34*	-.02	-.31*	-.36*	-.43**
<b>5. Depression</b>	1	.67**	.70**	-.13	-.44**	-.42**
<b>6. Anxiety</b>		1	.73**	-.22	-.36*	-.32*
<b>7. Stress</b>			1	-.20	-.36*	-.33*
<b>8. Organisational commitment</b>				1	.16	.20
<b>9. Procedural justice</b>					1	.72**
<b>10. Distributive justice</b>						1

\*Correlation is significant at the .05 level

\*\*Correlation is significant at the .01 level

## 4.3 Testing the Hypotheses

### 4.3.1 Mental health

*Hypothesis 1: Participants who report being subjected to higher rates of bullying are expected to report greater psychological distress in terms of higher depression, anxiety and stress than those participants who report lower rates of bullying.*

To test the hypothesis that those participants who were subjected to high levels of bullying would report greater psychological distress than those subjected to low levels of bullying, a series of independent t tests were carried out with *level of bullying* as the independent variable. *Low level of bullying* was made up by adding together the participant's responses to the question 'How often have you been bullied?' and adding the responses *have not been bullied, rarely bullied* and *bullied now and then* ( $n = 12$ ). The variable *high level of bullying* was made up by adding the responses *bullied several times per month, bullied several times per week* and *bullied almost daily* ( $n = 31$ ).

While no significant differences were found between the *depression* scores of those participants who reported *low levels of self-reported bullying* ( $M = 26.83$ ,  $SD = 9.62$ ) compared to those participants who reported *high levels of self reported bullying* ( $M = 29.87$ ,  $SD = 12.19$ ), results indicated that those subjects who were reported that they were exposed to higher levels of bullying had significantly higher levels of *anxiety* ( $M = 26.64$ ,  $SD = 12.70$ ) than those participants who were exposed to *low levels of self-reported bullying* ( $M = 12.00$ ,  $SD = 9.38$ ),  $t(27.1) = -4.13$ .,  $p < .01$ . Similarly, results indicated that those subjects who believed that they had been were exposed to higher levels of bullying had significantly higher levels of *stress* ( $M = 32.49$ ,  $SD = 9.14$ ) than those participants who werebeveled that ehy had

been exposed to *low levels of bullying* ( $M = 26.0$ ,  $SD = 7.95$ ),  $t(23.25) = -2.25$ ,  $p < .05$ .

#### 4.3.2 Worker's compensation claim and mental health

*Hypothesis 2: Participants who submitted a worker's compensation claim are expected to report more severe symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress than those participants who did not submit a worker's compensation claim.*

The hypotheses that participants who submitted a worker's compensation claim would report more severe depression, anxiety and stress than those participants who had not submitted a worker's compensation claim was only partially supported. An independent samples *t*-test was conducted to compare the *depression*, *anxiety* and *stress* scores of those participants who had submitted a worker's compensation claim and those participants who had not submitted a claim. A significantly higher *depression* score was found in those participants who had submitted a claim ( $M = 33.0$ ,  $SD = 9.3$ ) compared to those who had not submitted a claim ( $M = 22.9$ ,  $SD = 11.4$ );  $t(39) = 3.0$ ,  $p < .01$ .

However, no significant difference was found in *anxiety* scores of participants who had submitted a worker's compensation claim ( $M = 25.4$ ,  $SD = 12.8$ ) and those who had not submitted a worker's compensation claim ( $M = 17.8$ ,  $SD = 14.5$ );  $t(39) = 1.6$ ,  $p > .05$ . Similarly, no significant difference was found in the *stress* scores of participants who had lodged a worker's compensation claim ( $M = 31.6$ ,  $SD = 9.7$ ) compared to those who had not submitted a worker's compensation claim ( $M = 29.6$ ,  $SD = 7.9$ );  $t(38) = .62$ ,  $p > .05$ .

### 4.3.3 Worker's compensation claim and negative acts

*Hypotheses 3: Participants who submitted a worker's compensation claim are expected to report more negative acts carried out against them than those who did not submit a worker's compensation claim.*

In order to test the hypothesis that participants who had submitted a worker's compensation claim ( $n = 28$ ) would report more negative acts carried out against them than those who had not submitted a workers' compensation claim ( $n = 13$ ), an independent *t*-test was carried out with *workers' compensation claim* as the dependent variable and *scores* on the NAQ-R as the independent variable. No significant difference was found between the total NAQ-R scores of participants who had not submitted a workers' compensation claim ( $M = 63.0, SD = 21.0$ ) as compared to those who had submitted a workers' compensation claim ( $M = 72.4, SD = 19.5$ ). This suggests that the decision to lodge a workers' compensation claim is not predominantly based on the number of negative acts that have been perpetrated against a target.

### 4.3.4 Negative acts and organisational commitment

*Hypothesis 4: A significant negative relationship is expected between the number of negative acts participants were exposed to and their level of organisational commitment.*

In order to test the hypotheses that there would be a significant a negative relationship between the number of negative acts participants were subjected to and their commitment to their organisation, Pearson product-moment correlations were carried out. While there was no significant relationship found between *number of negative acts reported* (Total NAQ-R) and *affective organisational commitment*, a significant negative relationship was found between *number of negative acts reported*

and *continuous organisational commitment* ( $-.35, p < .05$ ). This suggests that the more negative acts experienced by participants, the less the costs were that participants associated with leaving the organisation. No significant relationships were found between *rate of bullying* and the *organisational commitment* measures.

#### 4.3.5 Perception of justice and mental health

**Hypothesis 5:** *Participants who reported a higher frequency of bullying are expected to report lower perceptions of organisational justice and greater mental health problems compared to those participants who reported a low frequency of bullying.*

Independent *t*-tests were carried out to examine whether there was a significant difference in the perceptions of organisational justice (*procedural justice*, *interpersonal justice* and *distributive justice*) and mental health (*depression* and *anxiety*) between those participants who had reported *low rate of bullying* compared with *high rate of bullying*. In order to examine the effects of bullying (as opposed to negative acts), the six groupings of the extent of bullying behaviour to which the participant was exposed to were transformed into a variable labelled *high level of bullying* and *low level of bullying*. *Low level of bullying* was made up by adding together the participant's responses to the question 'How often have you been bullied?' and adding the responses *have not been bullied*, *rarely bullied* and *bullied now and then* ( $n = 12$ ). The variable *high level of bullying* was made up by adding the responses *bullied several times per month*, *bullied several times per week* and *bullied almost daily* ( $n = 31$ ).

No significant differences were found between the perceptions of *distributive justice* of those participants who reported high levels of bullying ( $M = 5.66, SD = 2.57$ ) compared to those who reported low levels of bullying ( $M = 5.96, SD = 3.96$ ),

*procedural justice* scores of those participants who reported high levels of bullying ( $M = 13.81, SD = 5.28$ ) compared to low levels of bullying ( $M = 13.45, SD = 7.78$ ) or *interpersonal justice* of those participants who reported high levels of bullying ( $M = 13.09, SD = 5.33$ ), compared to those who reported low levels of bullying ( $M = 14.46, SD = 7.13$ ).

Table 4.9  
*Inter-correlations between Mental Health Variables, Perceptions of Organisational Justice, Level of Bullying and Lodgement of Workers' Compensation Claim*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
<b>1</b>		.67**	.70**	-.39**	-.37*	-.45**	.12	.43**
<b>Depression</b>								
<b>2</b>			.74**	-.21	.37*	-.29	.49**	.26
<b>Anxiety</b>								
<b>3</b>				-.12	-.31*	-.36*	.31	-.10
<b>Stress</b>								
<b>4</b>					.64**	.49**	-.04	.45**
<b>Distributive justice</b>								
<b>5</b>						.74**	-.02	.60**
<b>Procedural justice</b>								
<b>6</b>							.09	.56**
<b>Interpersonal justice</b>								
<b>7</b>								-.08
<b>Level of bullying</b>								
<b>8</b>								
<b>Workers' compensation claim</b>								

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

As illustrated in Table 4.9, participants' *depression* scores were highly negatively correlated with all measures of *organisational justice*. However, it was interesting that *stress* scores, while showing a significant negative relationship with both perceptions of *procedural justice* and perceptions of *interpersonal justice*, failed to reach statistical significance in their relationship with *distributive justice*.

Likewise, the relationship between participants' *anxiety* scores and their perceptions of *distributive* and *interpersonal justice* failed to reach statistical significance.

However, overall the results of these correlations suggest that the greater the



psychological distress of participants, the poorer their perception of organisational justice.

Significant correlations were found between participants' evaluation of organisational justice in terms of *procedural*, *distributive* and *interpersonal justice* and whether or not participants lodged a *workers' compensation claim*, suggesting that those participants who perceived poor organisational justice were more likely to have submitted a workers' compensation claim.

A significant relationship was found between *level of bullying* and participants' level of *anxiety* suggesting that the higher the frequency of bullying, the greater the anxiety of the participant.

**Hypothesis 6:** *Participants who submitted a worker's compensation claim are expected to have a more negative evaluation of organisational justice than those participants who did not submit a worker's compensation claim.*

In order to test the hypothesis that workers who had submitted a *worker's compensation claim* would have a more negative evaluation of *organisational justice*, independent *t*-tests were carried out with *workers' compensation claim* as the independent variable. Supporting the hypothesis that those participants who submitted a *worker's compensation claim* would report a significantly lower evaluation of *organisational justice*, results indicated that perceived *interpersonal justice* was significantly lower in those participants who had submitted a *worker's compensation claim* ( $n = 26$ ) ( $M = 11.23$ ,  $SD = 5.34$ ) than those who had not submitted a claim ( $n = 13$ ) ( $M = 19.15$ ,  $SD = .6.30$ );  $t(20.86) = -3.88$ ,  $p < .01$ . Similarly, those participants who submitted a *worker's compensation claim* ( $M = 10.60$ ,  $SD = 3.79$ ) reported a lower perceived *procedural justice* than those participants who had not submitted a claim ( $M = 20.16$ ,  $SD = 9.23$ );  $t(12.69) = -3.46$ ,

$p < .01$ .) The hypothesis that those participants who submitted a *worker's compensation claim* ( $M = 4.70$ ,  $SD = 1.78$ ) would report a lower evaluation of *distributive justice* than those participants who had not submitted a claim ( $M = 8.23$ ,  $SD = 5.30$ ) was also supported ( $t(13.32) = -2.30$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

***Hypothesis 7: Participants who lodged a worker's compensation claim are expected to report significantly less commitment to their organisation than those participants who did not submit a worker's compensation claim.***

The hypothesis that participants who lodged workers' compensation claims would report significantly less commitment to their organisation in terms of *affective* and *continuous commitment* than those who did not lodge workers' compensation claims was not supported ( $p > .05$ ).

## **Chapter 5: Discussion and Overall Conclusions from the Complainants' Study**

The aim of this study was to deepen understanding of the complexities surrounding the consequences of complaining about workplace bullying. The methodology allowed the comparison of qualitative data from interviews with bullied workers (stage 1), with more empirical results gained from investigating specific hypotheses (stage 2). This chapter aims to discuss the results from both stages of this study by discussing the themes found in the qualitative part of this study in relation to the results of the empirical data. Through discussing the results of these two stages of the study collectively, a more comprehensive depiction of the concerns of bullied workers can be made, in comparison to consideration of the results from a single methodological perspective. Furthermore, these results can be explained from a more theoretical perspective, integrating the contributions of theory to account for some of the actions of the participants in the study.

### **5.1 Many Negative Behaviours—One Construct**

Results of both the interview study and empirical data indicated that participants were exposed to a number of different types of negative acts that they labelled as *bullying*. In the qualitative study, the term *bullying* was used to describe a wide range of conflict situations, including one-off negative behaviours or conflicts, unfair management decisions and actions, as well as repeated systemic behaviours that were directed towards the participant. *Bullying* was also used to describe sexualised aggressive behaviours that would fit recognised definitions of sexual harassment. The term *bullying* was also used to describe the organisation's unhelpful

and sometimes antagonistic response to the initial bullying complaint, or a lack of response and perception of colluding with the bully.

While the participants in this study identified and talked about significant inappropriate behaviours that were directed *towards them*, some participants also described conflict situations that they instigated and inappropriate behaviours that *they carried out* towards others. However, they did not perceive their own actions as bullying or as inappropriate, but interpreted the reprimand from others as bullying, despite initiating the conflict themselves. Similar behaviour has been reported by Zapf (1999), who found that sometimes bully targets do not recognise their own behaviours that may have contributed to the conflict. These results highlight the fact that *bullying is a subjective perception* and suggest that the attribution style of some complainants might explain why they perceive their own antagonistic behaviours as reasonable and the response of others as bullying. However, because bullying is usually studied as unitary phenomena, provocative complainants such as these are not identified in most research. There are very few studies that the author is aware of that differentiate between the provocative complainant and bully targets who are genuinely being subjected to inappropriate and unreasonable behaviours. Instead, the subjective account of bullying by all participants is taken at face value. However, given the subjective perception of workplace bullying, it may be that attribution style plays a role in whether a complainant believes they are being bullied in situations where they are not. There have, however, been some recent studies that have begun to examine the perceptions of abusive supervision and bullying within this theoretical framework (Martinko, Harvey, Sikora & Douglas, 2009) and suggest that individual differences in attribution style might play a significant role in perceptions of

bullying. Specifically, Martinko and colleagues (2009) found that subjects with attribution styles biased towards external explanations for negative outcomes reported higher levels of abusive supervision than those who favoured internal attributions for negative events. While a discourse on attribution style is beyond the scope of the current thesis, it is recognised that attribution style may be an important factor in explaining the subjective nature of workplace bullying.

In the quantitative part of the study, participants' responses on the NAQ-R also indicated that they were exposed to a wide range of negative behaviours at work. In particular, participants reported being exposed to negative behaviours of a personal nature to a greater extent than work-related negative acts. However, when provided with a specific definition of workplace bullying, 6.8 per cent of participants reported *no bullying* and a further 20.5 per cent reported being bullied *rarely or now and then*. This means that despite submitting a complaint of workplace bullying, only around 70 per cent of participants reported that they had been the bullied at work *at least* several times per month over the previous 12 months.

These results highlight how the difference in the way that bullying is measured and defined influences prevalence rates (Salin, 2001; Saunders, Huynh & Goodman-Delahunty, 2007). It also highlights how some employees who are subjected to frequently occurring negative acts, may not label themselves as bullied (Salin, 2001). Conversely, some employees who are exposed to isolated conflicts or subjected to behaviour or work processes that they consider unfair, may perceive and label this behaviour as bullying (Liefoghe & Mackenzie-Davey, 2010; Saunders et al., 2007).

These results suggest that workplace bullying, by nature, is more than just being exposed to negative behaviours. Results of the qualitative and quantitative stage of this study suggest that central to the definition of bullying is a perception of injustice in the nature of those acts, whether they are isolated behaviours, retribution for the complainant's own provocative behaviours or a series of targeted negative behaviours as suggested in the more recognised definitions of bullying. The results of the qualitative data suggested that participants not only found the initial interactions they were subjected to as unfair, but the way that the organisation managed their complaint of bullying added to their perception of injustice.

## **5.2 Bullying as an Injustice**

The strong theme of injustice in the qualitative study was also highlighted by results of the quantitative study that suggested that negative perceptions of justice were significantly related to decisions to submit a worker's compensation claim and were also related to greater depression, anxiety and stress. Results indicated that participants who submitted a worker's compensation claim perceived less interpersonal justice, procedural justice and distributive justice than those participants who did not submit a claim. These results support studies that indicate that relationships at work influence decisions to claim workers' compensation (Rosenman et al., 2000), and that an organisation's response to the workplace injury influences whether an employee will claim compensation (Dollard & Knott, 2004; Roberts & Markel, 2001; Winefield et al., 2010). While all participants suffered significant psychological injury, results of the current study suggested that participants who felt that they could not trust the person who managed their complaint (interpersonal justice), who did not feel that the complaint-management

process was fair (procedural justice) and disagreed with the outcome of the complaint (distributive justice) were more likely to claim workers' compensation. These results support the findings of Winefield and her colleagues (2010), who reported that workers who believed decisions were made unfairly and who believed they were treated without respect were more likely to make a claim for psychological injury than those workers who believed that they had been treated fairly by the organisation (Winefield et al., 2010).

A significant relationship was found between participants' scores on the DASS and their perceptions of *procedural* and *distributive justice*. The higher the participant's level of depression, anxiety and stress, the lower their perception of both procedural and distributive justice. Participants who submitted a worker's compensation claim were nearly twice as likely to perceive their complaint of bullying as having been managed unreasonably as those participants who did not submit a claim, suggesting that perceptions of fairness and justice will influence an employee's decision to claim workers' compensation following a workplace injury. These results are supported by the themes in the qualitative study that suggest that a successful worker's compensation claim is viewed by participants as validating their perception of injustice and substantiating their complaint of bullying. These qualitative results suggest that one of the reasons that participants claimed worker's compensation was due to their perception of injustice in the situation in which they found themselves. Participants talked about the worker's compensation claim process being a process that occurred independent of their organisation, thus allowing their allegations of bullying to be investigated without bias. A successful compensation claim was viewed as vindicating their perspective of the bullying. Participants also

made bullying, sexual harassment and discrimination complaints to the relevant government jurisdictions, such as the SAEOC, HREOC or Safe Work SA and took legal action against their organisation as a result of the perceived injustice. These actions can be viewed as retaliatory CWBs in response to perceptions of injustice.

CWBs have been reported as a response to a perceived injustice or breach of psychological contract in the workplace in a number of studies (Fox et al., 2001; Folger & Cropanzano, 1998; Skarlicki & Folger, 1997; Spector & Fox, 2010). However, the submission of a worker's compensation claim has not been examined from within this 'justice perspective' before. The submission of a worker's compensation claim can be viewed as CWB, as it places the organisation in a position of having to defend its actions toward the claimant, and a successful claim means the organisation needs to concede their fault and pay an increased insurance premium. In a similar manner, a complaint to a government jurisdiction that oversees occupational health and safety, or workplace discrimination and harassment can be considered CWB, as it is not in the best interests of the workplace to have the complaint made. Spector and Fox (2010) draw attention to the relationship between the employee and the individual responsible for the perceived injustice as being important in determining what kinds of CWBs might be taken by a bully target. They report that if the perpetrator is of the same or lower hierarchical level as the person perceiving the injustice (the bully target), then the CWBs will be aimed toward them. However, if the individual deemed responsible for the behaviour is a superior, then it is likely the CWB will be displaced to the organisation as a whole (Spector & Fox, 2010). The result of the current study supports this premise, and a worker's compensation claim can be viewed as CWB that is aimed at the organisation as a



whole, rather than at an individual bully perpetrator. The blaming the organisation fits with the perception of most of the bully targets that the organisation colluded with the bully through lack of support, inaction or active collaboration. It also supports the finding that 61 per cent of complainants reported that they had been bullied by their direct line supervisor, and 45 per cent reported that they had been bullied by a senior manager in the organisation.

It was noted during the interviews that despite some participants talking about taking specific revenge behaviours against individuals or the organisation, their responses on the Vengeance Scale indicated no desire for vengeance or retribution. For example, the participant who said he would shoot the management team if his worker's compensation claim was rejected a second time indicated on the Vengeance Scale Questionnaire that he had no desire for vengeance and that he was not a vengeful person. Given the poor relationship between scores on the Vengeance Scale and the other variables, it is thought that the participants' responses on the Vengeance Scale reflected a strong social-desirability response bias. Further, it is considered that the Vengeance Scale may have been measuring a global construct of vengeance, which may be more sensitive to positive bias, rather than acts of retribution relating to the workplace bullying and injustice. It is recommended that future studies examining revenge behaviours following workplace bullying utilise a scale that more specifically measures behaviours as opposed to vengeance attributions.

### **5.3 Mental Health**

Another major theme to emerge from the analysis of the interview data was the mental and physical health repercussions of bullying. The study participants

reported that their health problems were a result of the workplace bullying to which they were exposed. This was supported by results from the quantitative part of the study that indicated that 75 per cent of participants had depression scores that ranged from *severe to extremely severe depression*, 61 per cent of participants had *anxiety* scores in the *severe to extremely severe* range and 68 per cent of participants recorded *stress* scores in the *severe to extremely severe* range. Participants who were bullied several times a month or more reported significantly greater levels of *anxiety* and *stress* than those who reported less bullying, although it was interesting to note that the *depression* score of participants did not differ in relation to the amount of bullying to which targets were exposed.

These results support a number of other studies that indicate that workplace bullying is a significant source of workplace stress and anxiety (Vartia, 2001; Zapf et al., 1996) and contributes to long-term and severe mental health consequences for targets (Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2003; Hoel et al., 2004; Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2004; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002; Tehrani, 2004). Given the cross-sectional design of the study, one cannot assume that the bullying reported by participants was a direct cause of their reported levels of *depression*, *anxiety* and *stress*. Nevertheless the qualitative data certainly suggests that the participants themselves attribute many of their mental health problems to the workplace bullying to which they were exposed.

One would expect that workers who lodge a worker's compensation claim as a result of a workplace psychological injury would report greater psychological distress than those workers who did not lodge a compensation claim. This hypothesis was partially supported with results indicating that those participants who had high

levels of *depression* were more likely to lodge a workers' compensation claim than those with lower levels of *depression*. However, contrary to predictions, no significant difference was found in the *anxiety* and *stress* scores of participants who lodged a workers' compensation claim compared to those who did not lodge a claim for psychological injury. Again, these results suggest that factors other than the acquisition of a compensable psychological injury as a result of workplace bullying contribute to the decision to lodge a worker's compensation claim in relation to the injury.

#### **5.4 Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

One of the criticisms of qualitative research is the perception that 'anything goes' (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and this is often seen as a limitation by those researchers who are challenged by the emerging popularity of qualitative approaches in psychology. There are a number of guidelines that have helped legitimise qualitative research and allow for qualitative research to develop and emerge as a valid methodology in its own right. The current study adhered to the guidelines suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Pope and Mays (2006) that help to legitimise the current research and ensure that the qualitative studies of this nature are methodologically rigorous. However, one of the limitations of the current study is that no inter-rater reliability cross checks of the coding were performed by another researcher, and therefore it is possible the emergent codes may have been interpreted in a different manner or labelled another way by a different analyst. However, the need for inter-rater reliability checks in qualitative research is a hotly debated topic (Armstrong, Gosling, Weinman & Marteau, 1997). Given the mixed methods design of the studies in this thesis and triangulation of results, I would argue that cross

checking the coding of these exploratory studies was not paramount, but does need to be taken into account in more focused qualitative studies that emerge from the current results.

The cross-sectional design of these studies means that no conclusions can be made about the predictive value of any of the variables. Pre-bullying psychological functioning was not investigated. While Matthiesen and Einarsen (2001) advise against speaking about a general victim personality, it is possible that participants who volunteered to participate in research such as this were particularly affected by their bullying experience and represent a particular group of disaffected bully victims. One potential limitation of the present study is the nature of the sample. Participants who responded to the media release and participated in the study may have had a vested interest in the topic. All participants labelled themselves as having been bullied at work and actively pursued an opportunity to talk about their experiences. It is probable that those participants who responded to the radio and television interviews and the letter from WorkCover had more significant adjustment problems than the wider population of bullied workers. This is a common problem in research that is studying workplace conflicts and bullying, where it can be assumed that escalated cases are over-represented (Zapf & Goss, 2001). Nielsen and Einarsen (2008) found that bullied targets recruited through convenience sampling differed from targets in general on both demographic characteristics and in regard to the frequency and intensity of the aggression they reported. Targets recruited through convenience sampling reported significantly more frequent and intense exposure to bullying than did the targets in the representative sample (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2008).

Therefore, it is recommended that future studies consider recruiting a more representative sample of bullied workers to allow for more generalisable results.

The interview data strongly suggest that one of the reasons why participants lodged a worker's compensation claim was because this was one way that they could have their complaint of workplace bullying and subsequent mental health problems validated. However, the cross-sectional design of this study precludes us from knowing whether participants' mental health problems were a result of the initial bullying, or were exacerbated by their perception of injustice in relation to the organisation's response to their bullying complaint. In order to test this hypothesis, studies incorporating a longitudinal design would need to survey participants prior to the initial bullying, follow the bullying and during the complaint-handling process. Given the difficulties and constraints, this would be an arduous and perhaps unrealistic process. However, future studies would benefit from examining whether the process of submitting a worker's compensation claim in itself exacerbates the depression and anxiety reported by claimants.

The sample size was relatively small, with only 44 participants in the quantitative stage of the study and 31 participants being interviewed. Therefore, results should be interpreted with caution and cannot be generalised to the wider population of bullied workers. Nevertheless, the key findings from both the qualitative and empirical aspects of the study support other findings in the wider bullying and justice literature.

The results of this study suggests that further research is needed, particularly in relation to workplace bullying and perceptions of justice and the impact that attribution style might have on the perception of being bullied and on perceptions of

justice. In the current study, perceptions of injustice were central to participants' experience of feeling bullied and were also an important factor in their decision to lodge a worker's compensation claim and in taking legal action against their employer. Despite this, few previous studies have specifically examined justice perceptions of bully targets in relation to complaining about workplace bullying.

## Chapter 6: Study 2—The Bully

### 6.1 Introduction

#### 6.1.1 Why focus on the bully?

The bullying literature has overwhelmingly been informed through the perceptions of bullied workers and to a lesser extent by witnesses of workplace bullying. Despite a few recent studies examining bully perpetrators, studies focusing on the bullies' perspective of events remains largely absent. This 'black hole' of conspicuously absent data, as referred to by Rayner and Cooper in 2003, largely remains.

We know little about the bullies' motivations or justification for their behaviour and what we do know about bullies has been gained largely through subjective reports by targets and witnesses. This may be because of the difficulties recruiting study participants who admit to being a bully and concerns related to social desirability and gaining accurate reports from the perpetrators of workplace bullying. However, it is be argued that employees who label themselves as bully victims or targets also report a subjective perspective and are influenced by social desirability. Results from the first study in this thesis also suggest that bully targets name a wide range of behaviours as workplace bullying and are keen to have their version of events validated. Social desirability is just as important for targets of workplace bullying as it is for the perpetrators. However, the research to date is overwhelmingly influenced by the target's perspective in contrast to the perspective of the alleged perpetrator. This means that approaches to prevent and manage bullying are predominantly informed by target accounts of workplace bullying.

However, as highlighted in the first study in this thesis, when examined closely, targets' accounts of workplace bullying indicate that bullying is not a uniform phenomenon, and some bully complainants/targets may have acted in a provocative manner, with attempts at managing their performance or behaviour interpreted as bullying. Thus, interventions designed to improve the behaviours of managers and supervisors without addressing employee behaviours, might be less than optimal.

One of the first studies that sought to gain the perspectives of bullies was a study by Coyne, Chong, Seigne and Randell (2003), in which the percentage of individuals that actually classified themselves as bullies was sought. Their results indicated that, as with victim reports of bullying, the prevalence rate varied depending on how bullying was measured. Coyne and his colleagues (2003) found that up to 19.3 per cent of their 288 participants reported that they had subjected others to bullying. However, this behaviour decreased to 2.7 per cent when both self- and peer-nominated criteria were used to determine whether bullying had occurred; that is, when self-reported bullying was validated by at least two colleagues (Coyne et al., 2003). These results were the first to provide bullying prevalence rates from the bullies' perspective (usually prevalence rates are based on targets' reports) and again highlight the diverse prevalence range that is reported depending on how workplace bullying is measured. However, the study is unique in that this information was gathered from the bullies themselves, and not from victims' accounts of bullying behaviour.

Several explanations have been provided as to why individuals engage in bullying behaviours, including the protection of self-esteem, lack of social competence (Zapf & Einarsen, 2003), retaliatory behaviours (Zapf & Gross, 2001)



and in defence against further acts of mistreatment (Aquino & Thau, 2009; Lee & Brotheridge, 2006). However, Zapf and Einarsen (2003) strongly argue against looking for a single cause of bullying within the personality of the perpetrator, but highlight the studies that have repeatedly found that both organisational and workgroup antecedents, as well as target characteristics, all interact to allow a bully perpetrator to carry out the behaviour unchecked. In a recent study examining the antecedents to workplace bullying, respondents were asked to indicate not only whether *they had been* bullied at work, but whether *they had bullied* anyone at work over the previous six months (Hauge et al., 2009). Results indicated that 2.9 per cent of respondents had bullied someone at work in the previous six-month period, with a further one per cent of respondents reporting that they were also victims of workplace bullying. Results suggested that target status was an important predictor of being a perpetrator of workplace bullying, and the probability of being a perpetrator increased with intensified frequency of exposure to bullying (Hauge et al., 2009). These results support studies that suggest that perceptions of unfair treatment are an important reason why some employees engage in aggressive workplace behaviours (Lee & Brotheridge, 2006) and also support the conflict-escalation approach to bullying, where conflicts escalate as both parties retaliate against the behaviour they are exposed to (Zapf & Gross, 2001).

In another recent study, De Cuyper, Baillien and De Witte (2009) found that job insecurity was associated with both targets' and perpetrators' perceptions of workplace bullying. However, contrary to their predications, the relationship between job insecurity and bullying was stronger when the perpetrators perceived they were highly employable. The results of this study are important for two reasons.

Firstly, as with the results of the study by Hague and colleagues (2009), the study supported others taken from the target's perspective, where the work environment and job characteristics were found to be important antecedents to bullying (De Cuyper et al., 2009). However, unlike other studies that suggest that job insecurity is positively associated with bullying (Hoel & Salin, 2003; Baillien et al., 2009), this study suggested that employability was more strongly associated with perpetrators carrying out bullying behaviours. These results suggest that from the perpetrator's perspective, employability may contribute to greater bullying behaviours (De Cuyper et al., 2009), because they can easily get another job if they are forced to leave the organisation.

### **6.1.2 The consequences of being accused of workplace bullying**

Despite the research that is slowly starting to emerge, examining bullying from the perpetrator's perspective, there have been no studies that the author is aware of that have examined the *consequences* of being labelled a bully. The popular press contributes to the layperson's perception of a *bully* as that of a psychopathic predator and serves to stigmatise the perpetrator without taking into account any of the environmental and social antecedents that more than ten years of bullying research has identified as contributing to workplace bullying. This is partly because the public's understanding of bullying is significantly influenced by the popular literature and the way that the media disseminates information (Lewig & Dollard, 2001). Books with catchy titles such as *Snakes in Suits: When Psychopaths Go to Work* (Babiak & Hare, 2006) and *Working with Monsters: How to Identify and Protect Yourself from the Workplace Psychopath* (Clarke, 2005), as well as the tabloid press 'Beware the Queen Bee' (*The Age*, 12 August 2006) and 'Beware of the

Psycho Boss—The Enemy Within’ (*The Age*, 31 May 2007), popularise the idea of bullies and make it appear as though psychopathic predators are in every workplace. This type of popular portrayal of bullies is captured by literature that is written in a semi-scientific style that captures the imagination of the audience by providing descriptive case studies that are extrapolated from a number of sources, including criminal and forensic settings. For example, in their preface, Babiak and Hare (2006) state the following:

The scientific literature on the behaviour of criminal psychopaths is extensive but geared to the forensic scientist and the clinician. We hope to close some of the gaps in the current understanding of psychopaths among business readers by using non-technical language and case studies. We want to provide the reader with the experience of working next to a corporate psychopath by presenting the kinds of real life situations we have encountered in our work. Because a psychopathic co-worker can harm your career in seen and unseen ways, we hope that this knowledge will prepare you to defend yourself in the future. (p. xiv)

Newspaper articles also propagate these stereotypes of the psychopath–bully. For example, *The Age* carried an article outlining the following five signs that ‘Your Boss May Be a Cooperate Psychopath’:

1. He/she wants your ideas but claims them as their own. You often feel manipulated, used or conned.
2. He/she is deluded and obviously disconnected from the reality of the office.
3. He/she cannot show compassion, empathy, remorse or guilt, but will sometimes try to fake them.
4. He/she displays poor behaviour control and, in particular, excessive impulsiveness.

5. He/she is reluctant to take responsibility for their actions and errors and exhibits haughty self-righteousness. (*The Age*, 31 May 2007)

As Caponecchia and Wyatt (2007, 2009) point out, the term *psychopath* is freely used in the popular press to describe workplace bullies, but only serves to reinforce the ‘shame and blame’ approach to preventing and managing bullying, because it pathologises the behaviour (often unsubstantiated) of individuals who are accused of bullying. The focus on the bully–psychopath also fails to address bullying from within the recommended occupational health and safety framework that assesses risks that may contribute to bullying such as poor management styles, negative workplace characteristics and poor work systems (Caponecchia & Wyatt, 2007; Caponecchia & Wyatt, 2009; Dollard & Knott, 2004).

The extent to which conflicts are highly emotive and subjective means that in conflict situations, negative interactions may be interpreted in a way that reinforces labels such as *bully* and *psychopath*. As previously discussed, employee accounts of bullying can be quite different to recognised definitions of bullying and the use of the term *bullying* by employees can be used to voice disagreement or dissatisfaction with a number of different types of conflict situations as well as unpopular management decisions (Liefoghe & Mackenzie-Davey, 2003). Further, as found in the first study in this thesis, some employees who are subjected to negative behaviours at work such as one-off conflicts, negative performance reviews or unpopular ramifications following organisational changes may frame these conflicts as ‘bullying’.

### **6.1.3 The accused bullies’ perspective**

As discussed in Chapter 1, research consistently points to a range of factors that contribute to workplace bullying. These factors are the individual personalities

of the bully and the target along with the workplace industrial environment and organisational culture (Einarsen, 1999; Moayed, Daraiseh, Shell & Salem, 2006; Salin, 2003; Tuckey, Dollard, Hosking & Winefield, 2009; Zapf, 1999; Zapf et al., 2003). The potential causes of bullying have been described as being organisational and social antecedents, as well as the individual personality and actions of the target and of the perpetrator. While these four antecedents have been shown to contribute to bullying, it is likely that these factors interact and each plays a part in the development and maintenance of bullying at work (Zapf, 1999).

Despite these antecedents being widely accepted as potential causes of bullying behaviour, none has been examined from the perspective of the perpetrator, and the way in which these antecedents contribute to justifications of the bullies' behaviour from their perspective has not been examined before. The central aim in Study 2 is to examine whether the background of bullying allegations is similar to that identified by previous bullying research with targets and bystanders.

While research suggests that most complaints of workplace bullying are against managers (Zapf et al., 2003), there is some evidence that, less commonly, managers can also be the targets of workplace bullying from subordinates (Branch, Ramsey & Barker, 2007; Rayner & Cooper, 2003; Zapf et al., 2003). Supporting this view, 11 per cent of the participants in the first study in this thesis reported being bullied by a subordinate. One of the ways in which subordinates may be able to bully their manager is by making a formal complaint against them and requesting a formal investigation. There is some anecdotal evidence and case study research (Anonymous, 2003; Branch et al., 2007) that suggests that this may be a practice that is becoming more common and that making an allegation of bullying may be a form

of bullying in itself. The use of grievance procedures to isolate a manager from peer supports is one way that a bully can target and isolate someone with greater hierarchical power than himself or herself. The current study aims to examine whether this was the perception of any of the accused bullies in the current study. It is hypothesised that in some cases, the accused bullies would report being bullied by their subordinates and that the grievance procedure was used to target them as a method of *upward bullying*.

As illustrated in Figure 6.1, bully perpetrators may also see themselves as both victims and bullies. In line with the antecedents of workplace bullying discussed in Chapter 1, it is expected that the accused bullies will justify their actions as responding to escalating conflict that is not their fault, or appropriately responding to subordinate poor performance. It is expected that many will report feeling victimised by a complaint made against them for what they believe is the carrying out of appropriate managerial actions. Others are expected to describe behaviours that a reasonable person might judge as inappropriate, but they describe as normal behaviour. It is expected that this group of participants will view their actions in a similar way to the bully/victims' group and justify their behaviour as reasonable management actions. It is expected that they will also blame the complainant for over-reacting to minor transgressions, or justify their actions by holding the complainant responsible for their actions. Still it is also expected that in some cases, the accused bullies perspective might be the accurate perceptible. In these cases, some complainants (self-labelled targets) may be labelling perfectly acceptable (or role required) managerial behaviours as bullying.

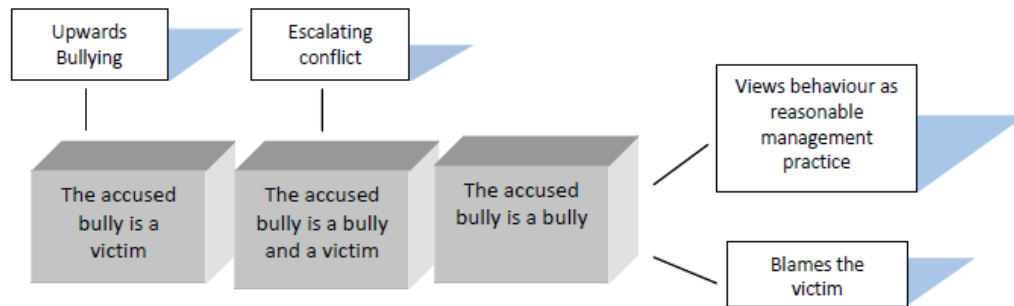


Figure 6.1. Justifications of bullying behaviours.

#### 6.1.4 Justice from the accused bullies' perspective

As discussed in Chapter 6, perceptions of justice have been identified as a core value in most organisations, with significant negative consequences in employee behaviour, attitudes and health when perceptions of organisational fairness or justice are violated (Bias & Tripp, 1996; Konovsky, 2000). Perceptions of injustice have been shown to contribute to higher levels of sick-leave absenteeism, reports of poor general health (Elovainio et al., 2002) and increased levels of psychological distress (Surinen et al., 2002) and depression (Ylipaavalniemi et al., 2005). From an economic perspective, perceptions of injustice have been found to influence employees' decisions to sue their employer, including the lodgement of workers' compensation claims following a workplace injury (Dollard et al., 1999; Roberts & Markel, 2001; Winefield et al., 2010) and to make wrongful-termination legal claims (Lind, Greenberg, Scott & Welchans, 2000b). In contrast, workers who make more favourable evaluations of organisational justice are more accepting of unfavourable management decisions (Tepper, 2001) and are less likely to take legal action against

their employer for wrongful termination (Goldman, 2003; Lind, Greenberg, Scott & Welchans, 2000a) or as a result of a workplace injury (Winefield et al., 2010).

As such, there are practical reasons for exploring the perceptions of justice and fairness and the consequences of injustice from the alleged perpetrators' perspective following an investigation of workplace bullying or harassment. Unlike a complainant who may be offered supports and who may have advocates, an accused bully may be less likely to have the sympathy of fellow workers. While the literature consistently reports negative outcomes for employees who make complaints of bullying and harassment (Boswell & Olson-Buchanan, 2004; Cortina & Magley, 2003; Kivimaki et al., 2003; Lewin & Peterson, 1999), there has been no research to the writer's knowledge on the impact of complaint processes and outcomes of workplace bullying complaints from the alleged perpetrator's perspective.

#### **6.1.5 Emotional impact of being accused of workplace bullying**

As discussed in Chapter 1, the literature has been consistent in its findings that exposure to bullying is a major factor in work-related stress. Even single acts of aggression and CWBs have been found to be associated with significant health problems in targets (Leymann, 1990; Lim et al., 2008). However, despite widespread research on bullying targets, no research to our knowledge has examined the psychological impact of being labelled a workplace bully or being accused of bullying. It is expected that being accused of workplace bullying will have a negative impact on the mental health of alleged perpetrators, similar to that of targets. This is because most of the alleged bullies are expected to identify as victims, whether they are found guilty or not of the allegations made against them. If a formal complaint against them is lodged, they have no choice but to submit to an investigation process,



and they are placed in a position where they will have to defend their behaviour. While most organisational complaint processes highlight the importance of confidentiality, it is probable that colleagues, subordinates, more senior managers and other employees will be aware of the allegations. Subsequently, it is thought that the accused bully will be embarrassed by the complaint against them and will view the complaint against them as a hostile act on the part of both the complainant and the organisation that has embarked on the bullying investigation.

## **Chapter 7: Method for Study 2**

### **7.1 Design of the Bullies' Study**

As with the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the Complainants' Study, a mixed-methods approach was used to investigate the perceptions and experiences of a group of managers who had been formally accused of workplace bullying. The justification of utilising a mixed methodology has been outlined in section 2.2.2 of this thesis and therefore will not be repeated here. Data was collected initially through interviews with the accused bullies and then through a survey instrument. Following the completion of both the qualitative and quantitative stages of this study, interpretation of the results incorporating both the narrative and statistical sources of data will be discussed together.

As the first part of this study is exploratory in nature, the interview data will be presented first. The second part of that study will report on survey data that addresses specific hypotheses.

#### **7.1.1 Stage 1: Research questions**

As this is one of the few studies that has focused exclusively on bully perpetrators, this exploratory research aims to elicit the views, perceptions and attributions of the alleged bully, something that has been missing from previous research. In the qualitative stage of the Bullies' Study, the research questions that guide the interviews are outlined below. The specific interview guide can be found in Appendix D.

1. It is anticipated that the accused bullies will report a poor working environment including high level of conflicts and inappropriate social behaviours, comparable to the working environments described in victims' accounts of workplace bullying that have been discussed in section 1.2.8.1 of this thesis.
2. Given that leadership style has been associated with workplace bullying (see section 1.2.8.3 to this thesis), it is anticipated that interviews with some of the accused bullies will expose either an autocratic leadership style or a laissez-fairer style of leadership.
3. Since target characteristics have been noted to contribute to bullying behaviours (see section 1.2.8.3 of this thesis), it is anticipated that the accused bullies will describe the complainants' behaviours as contributing to the bullying allegations, and will describe the complainant in terms of their poor performance or aggressive behaviours.
4. It is expected that the accused bullies will justify their actions in three ways, as illustrated in Figure 6.1. They will deny being a bully and report that they are a victim of bullying themselves. They will justify the allegation as part of an escalating conflict with the complainant, but deny they were bullying the complainant, or they will normalise their behaviour as carrying out appropriate managerial actions and blame the complainant for over-reacting or being vexatious.
5. Given the large body of research that reports the detrimental psychological and physical health effects of workplace bullying,(see section 1.2.7 of this thesis), it is expected that the accused bullies in this study who view

themselves as victims, will report high levels of psychological and physical distress.

### **7.1.2 Stage 2: Specific hypotheses to be tested**

This second stage of the Bullies' Study tests a number of specific hypotheses and it is anticipated that the results will consolidate some of the qualitative findings of the first stage. The central hypotheses are as follows:

1. Given the research that suggests that employee accounts of bullying do not always fit the recognised definitions of bullying, but instead describe negative workplace interactions (see section 1.2.5 of this thesis), it is expected that a proportion of the allegations against participants will not be substantiated as workplace bullying.
2. Irrespective of whether the allegations were substantiated or not, it is expected that the participants' responses on the DASS will reflect high levels of *depression, anxiety* and *stress*.
3. Since the participants are all in managerial positions, it is expected that their responses on the NAQ-R will indicate that they perpetrated more *work-orientated negative acts*, than *person-orientated negative acts* towards subordinates. It is expected that they will justify these negative acts as reasonable behaviours and legitimate performance management.
4. A significant difference is expected in the perceptions of *distributive justice* between participants who had been found guilty of bullying and those participants found not guilty of bullying. It is expected that those participants

who are found guilty of bullying will report significantly less *distributive justice* than those who were found not guilty of bullying.

5. A significant difference is expected between the perceptions of *procedural justice* between participants who were found guilty of bullying and those who were found not guilty of bullying, with those found not guilty of bullying reporting greater *procedural justice* than those found guilty of the allegations against them.
6. A significant difference is expected in the perceptions of *interpersonal justice* between participants who had been found guilty of bullying and those participants found not guilty of bullying, with those found not guilty of bullying reporting greater *interpersonal justice* than those found guilty of the allegations against them.

## **7.2 Participants**

As with the previous study in this thesis, the current study was advertised through radio and newspaper interviews, following a media release. A copy of the ethics approval for the study can be found in Appendix C. Participants were self-selected and contacted the researcher if they wanted to participate in the study by either completing a survey and/or attending an interview with the lead researcher. Participants were eligible to participate in the study if they were working in a managerial/supervisory capacity and had been accused of workplace bullying in the previous two years.

Eligible participants were invited to attend an interview and complete a survey questionnaire. Thirty (9 male and 21 female) participants completed the

survey questionnaire and 24 of those participants agreed to be interviewed for the study. Six participants declined to be interviewed but agreed to complete the survey. Two of the participants who were interviewed did not return the survey. Participants were aged between 29 and 63 years of age, with a median age of 49 years. Approximately 37 per cent were employed in the public service including hospitals, schools and government departments, 33 per cent were employed in the private sector, eight per cent were employed in local government and 20 per cent were employed by non-government agencies such as community run childcare organisations and charity organisations.

### **7.3 Interviews**

Twenty-four of the participants agreed to be interviewed as part of the study. Telephone interviews were conducted with 19 of the participants who lived outside the metropolitan area. Five participants from the metropolitan area were interviewed face-to-face. These interviews were carried out either at the university, or at the participant's request, at their place of work. Interviews ranged in duration from 30 minutes to 1 hour.

The interview questions were based around a loose interview guide, which was made up of a series of open-ended questions aimed at assessing the background of the allegations and the impact of the bullying allegation on the participants. Rather than a structured set of questions, the guide provided a list of areas that the researcher wanted to cover. A copy of the interview guide can be found in Appendix D. It was important to the researcher that the interviews took on the quality of an informal conversation with a purpose, as suggested by Marshall and Rossman

(1999), in order that participants were able to discuss sensitive issues relating to the bullying allegations made against them.

The interviewer aimed to elicit the participant's perspective as to why they were accused of bullying, and questions were designed to engage the participant in talking about various aspects of their complaint experience. The first question asked about the organisation in which they worked and the working environment, and then all participants were asked 'Can you tell me how you came to be accused of workplace bullying?' The informal nature of the interviews allowed the interviewer to deviate from the guide if a participant raised an important issue or provided an unusual answer to a question. The interviewer asked follow-up questions with probes such as 'Can you tell me more about that?' or 'What do you mean by...?' All of the interviews were audio taped and later transcribed. Field notes or memoranda were also made by the researcher in order to describe interesting or common issues that were uncovered during coding the transcripts, as outlined by Marshall and Rossman (1999).

### **7.3.1 Analysis of transcripts and coding of interview data**

Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach was employed to code the data and develop the final themes. These steps of thematic analysis are described in detail in section 2.4 of this thesis. As with the Complainants' Study, the research questions and the analysis of the interview data obtained from the accused bullies was partially driven by the literature. However, the strength of utilising accused bullies as research participants is the potential for this group of informants to provide information that builds on previous studies that have mainly been informed by bully targets and to a lesser extent, witnesses of workplace bullying. The initial codes and the reflexive

questions, notes and memoranda, undertaken as part of conducting qualitative research recommended by Mays and Pope, (2006) and Braun and Clarke, (2006) can be found in Appendix F.

As with the Complainants' Study, in order to provide a clear narrative of events, codes and themes were placed in an order that reflected the antecedents to the allegations, through to the repercussions of the bullying allegation for participants.

### **7.3.2 Questionnaire measures**

All 30 participants completed a survey questionnaire that asked about demographic variables (such as age, sex and type of job), as well as questions pertaining to participants' exposure to negative acts in the workplace.

The following definition of bullying from the South Australian Occupational Health Safety and Welfare Act was provided to participants:

Bullying is a situation where repeated unreasonable behaviour is directed towards an employee or a group of employees that a reasonable person would expect to victimise, humiliate, undermine or threaten the employee or employees to whom the behaviour is directed. We do not refer to a one-off incident as bullying.

Participants were asked: Using the above definition, please state whether you have been bullied at work over the last 12 months'. Answers were scored on a six-point scale ranging from *no, yes, very rarely, yes, now and then, yes, several times a week, yes, several times a month* and *yes, almost daily*. Participants were then asked: Who were the bullies'? (subordinate, colleague, supervisor or others). Using the same response scale, participants were also asked whether they had actively bullied



someone:  Please state whether you think you have bullied another person at work over the last 12 months‘?

### ***7.3.2.1 Negative Acts Questionnaire—Revised***

Negative workplace behaviours that were experienced by participants were measured with the NAQ-R (Einarsen et al., 2009). A full description of the NAQ and its justification for use in the current study can be found in section 2.6.3 of this thesis. In the current study, the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was .89 for the total NAQ-R, it was .67 for the work-orientated bullying subscale, .88 for the person-orientated bullying subscale and .81 for the physical intimidation subscale.

Negative acts *perpetrated towards others* by the participants in the study were also measured by the NAQ-R, which was modified from the passive (for example, *being ordered to do work below your level of competence*) to the active voice (for example, *ordering someone to do work below their level of confidence*). To the best of our knowledge, this is one of the first studies to utilise the NAQ-R to include perpetrators’ accounts of negative acts carried out against others. Reliability was somewhat lower with a Cronbach’s alpha of .71 for the total NAQ-R, and .52 for the work-orientated bullying subscale and .68 for the person-orientated bullying. No reliability can be reported for the physical intimidation subscale because of lack of variance. Most participants reported that they did not carry out any acts of physical intimidation.

### ***7.3.2.2 Depression Anxiety and Stress Scales***

The DASS (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) were chosen to measure respondents’ levels of *anxiety*, *depression* and *stress*. The DASS has been described

fully, and its use justified in section 2.6.3 of this thesis. In the current study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients were satisfactory for all subscales and were .86 for the *stress* subscale, .77 for the *anxiety* subscale, and .89 for the *depression* subscale.

### ***7.3.2.3 Organisational Justice Scales***

The Organisational Justice Scales (Colquitt, 2001) were utilised to measure the three dimensions of organisational justice. These scales have been described fully in section 2.6.1 of this thesis. In the current study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients were satisfactory for all subscales with an alpha coefficient of .91 for the *procedural justice* scale, .92 for the *interactional justice* scale and .96 for the *distributive justice* scale.

## **Chapter 8: Results of the Qualitative Stage of the Bullies' Study**

### **8.1 Generating the Themes**

#### **8.1.1 Generating the initial codes**

Following the approach of Braun and Clarke (2006), 46 codes were identified during the initial coding stage. A list of these open codes can be found in Appendix F. These codes represented the initial collation of ideas that were being expressed by participants about their experience of being accused of workplace bullying and undergoing an investigation. These codes were organised into a sequence that illustrated the progression of events that unfolded in relation to the allegations.

Reflections and notes by the researcher that were made during the coding process were also documented as suggested by Pope and Mays (2006) and Marshall and Rossman (1999). These notes provided context and early analytic insights about the data as it was being coded and helped identify some of the broader issues that the participant was addressing, including the links between the early codes. The grouping of the codes into initial loose themes also allowed for the detection of patterns from the data in a meaningful way, allowing the researcher to examine each code and emerging theme in relation to both bullying and justice theory. It was through this progression in the analysis that the codes were grouped into loose initial themes during which the axial coding process began to emerge.

#### **8.1.2 Developing early themes**

During the next stage of the coding process, eleven initial themes were identified. These subthemes identified common perceptions, beliefs and reactions of

the participants in relation to the bullying allegations made against them, including themes related to the allegation itself. As recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006), initial codes were sorted into these early subtheme themes and were collated. The figures below (Figures 8.1–8.9) illustrate these early themes and identify the codes that made up the particular theme.

The development of the themes from the coded data was literature driven because during this phase of analysis, previous research into workplace bullying was utilised to help identify the specific themes and to also identify themes that may be absent in the literature to date. For example the subthemes, *organisational environment*, *social environment of workgroup*, *characteristics of alleged bully*, *characteristics of the complainant* and the subtheme *perceptions of unfairness* were all issues that had been identified in previous workplace bullying research.

However, one of the differences in this study is that these subthemes, while having been identified in studies examining bullying from the target's perspective, had not been identified in studies examining the bullies' perspective of workplace bullying. Furthermore, themes such as *the bullying allegation*, *work environment after the allegation* and *repercussions of the allegation* all represented concerns that are relevant to the alleged bully but that have not previously been identified from the perspective of the alleged bully.



Figure 8.1. Initial themes: Organisational environment.

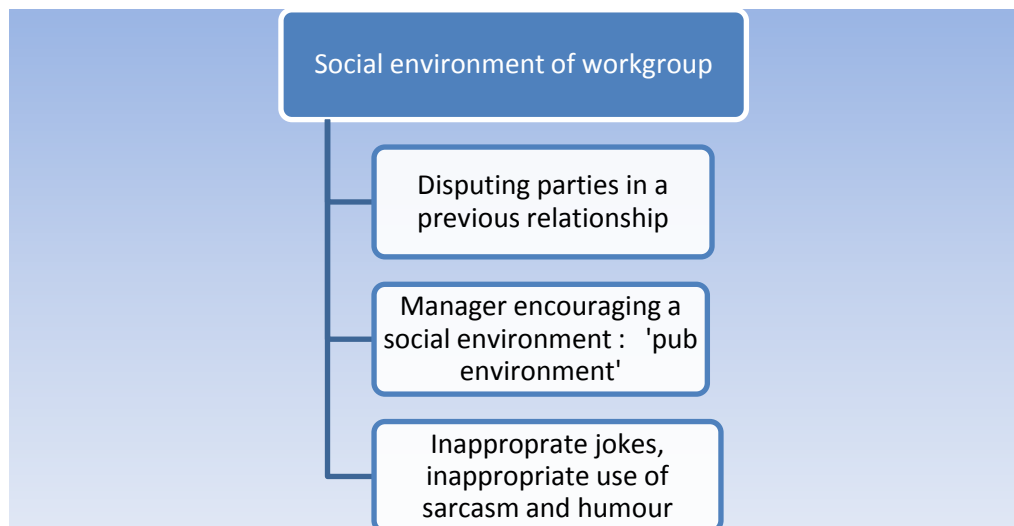
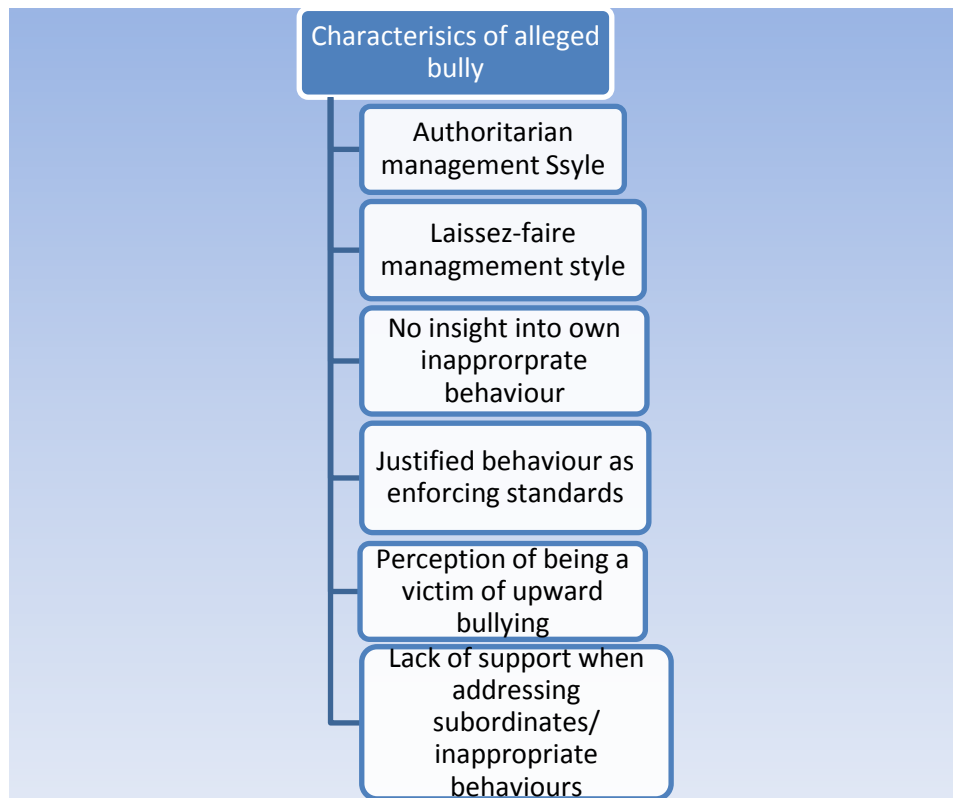
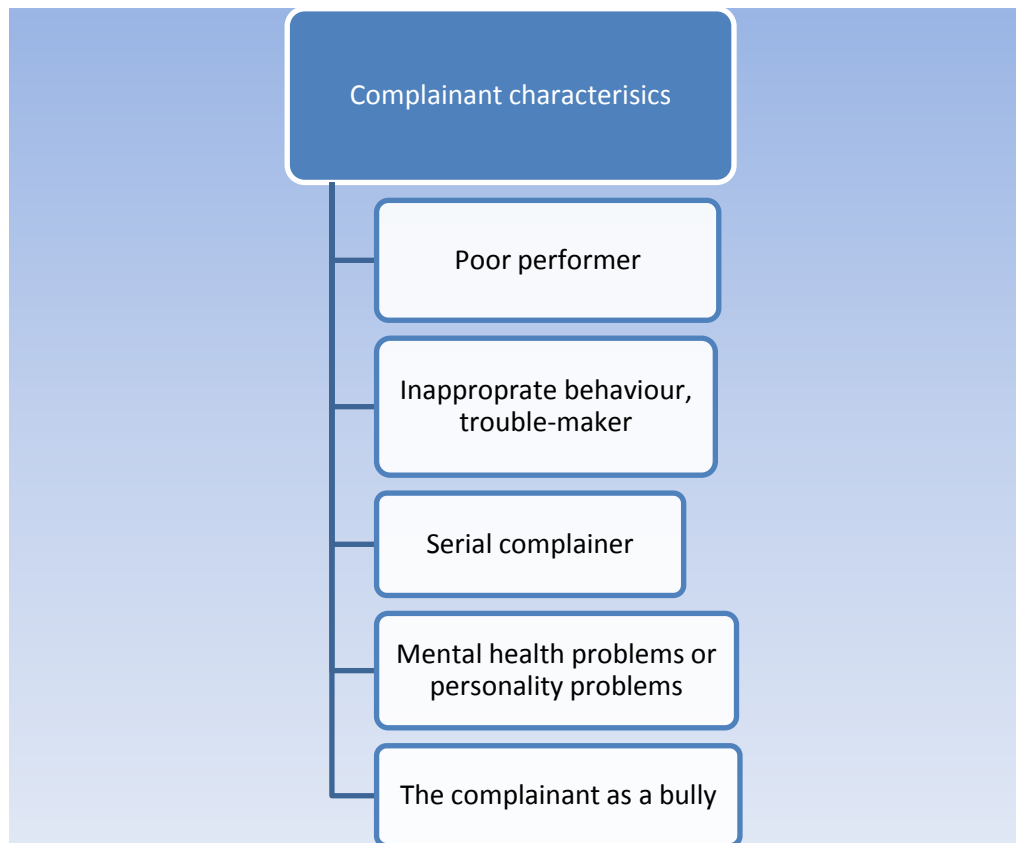


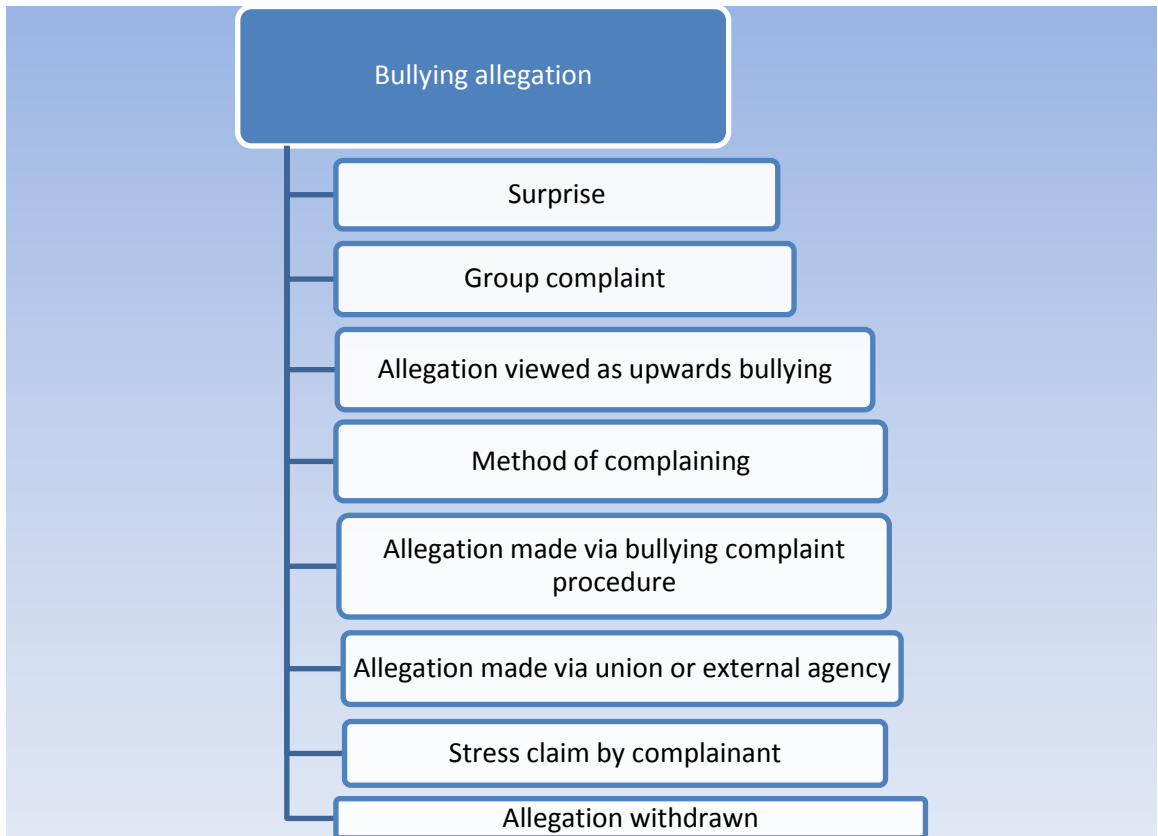
Figure 8.2. Initial themes: Social environment of workgroup.



*Figure 8.3.* Initial themes: Characteristics of alleged perpetrator.



*Figure 8.4.* Initial themes: Characteristics of the complainant.



*Figure 8.5.* Initial themes: The bullying allegation.



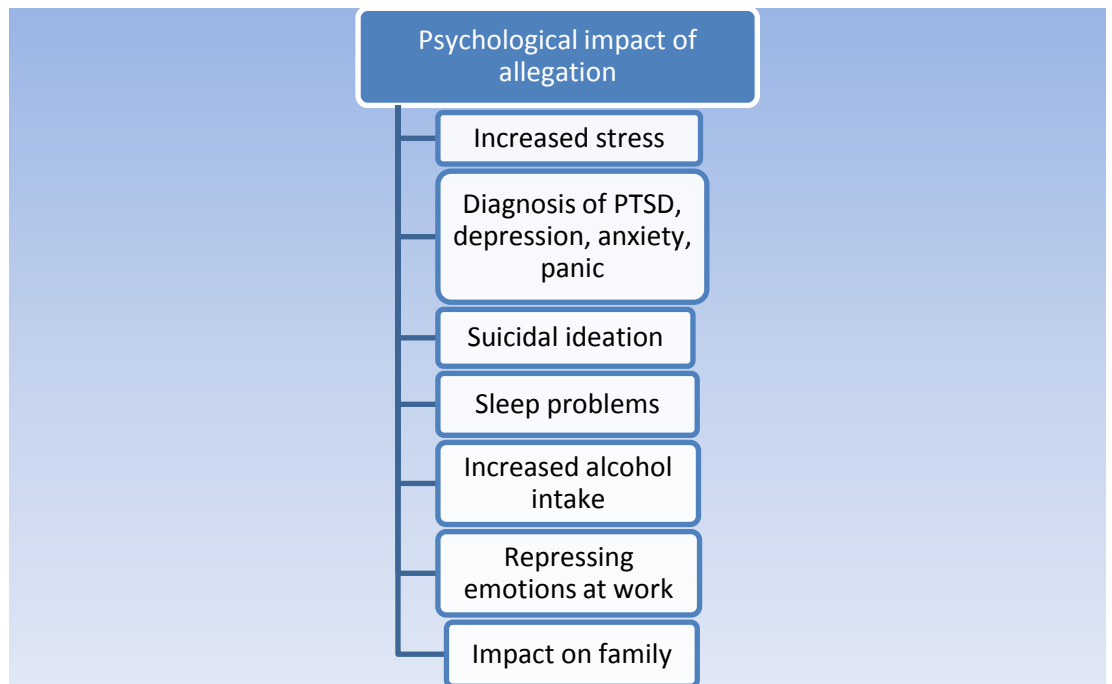


Figure 8.6. Initial themes: Psychological impact of allegation.

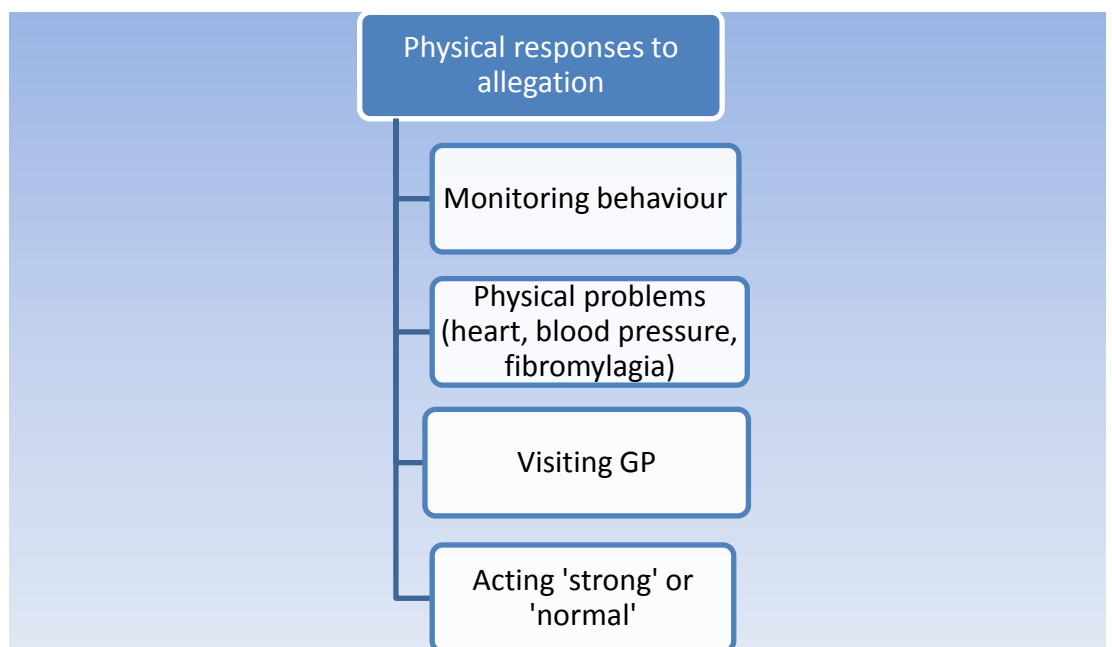


Figure 8.7. Initial themes: Physical response to the allegation.

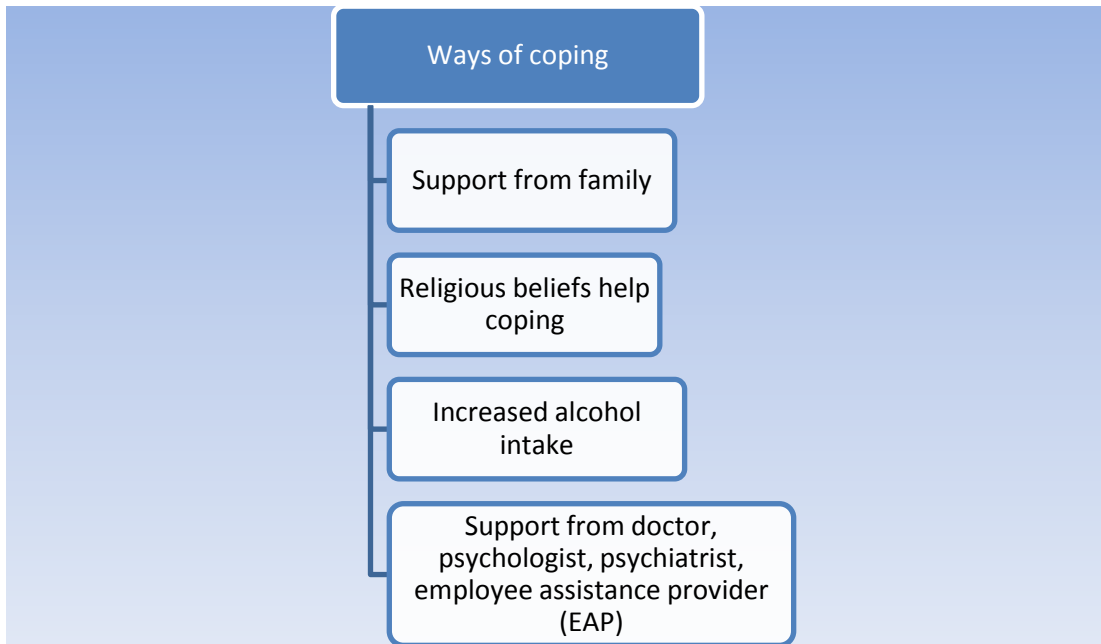
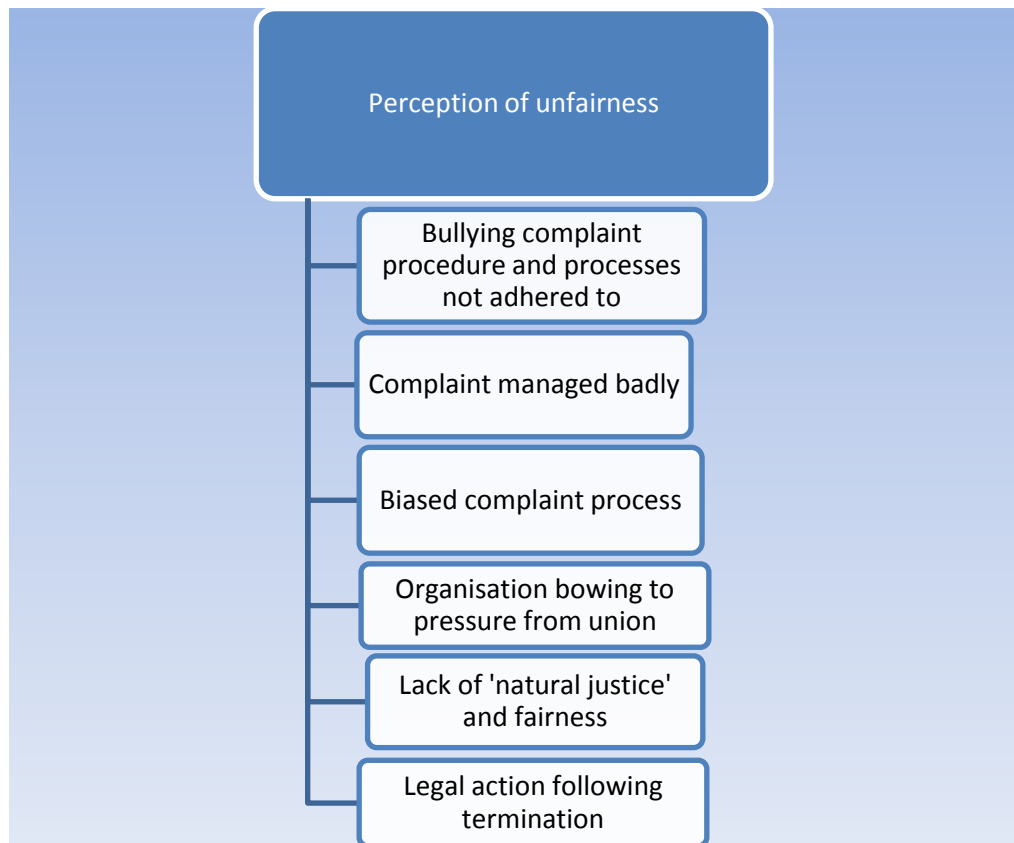


Figure 8.8. Initial themes: Ways of coping with the allegation.



Figure 8.9. Initial themes: Work environment after the allegation.



*Figure 8.10.* Initial themes: Perceptions of unfairness.



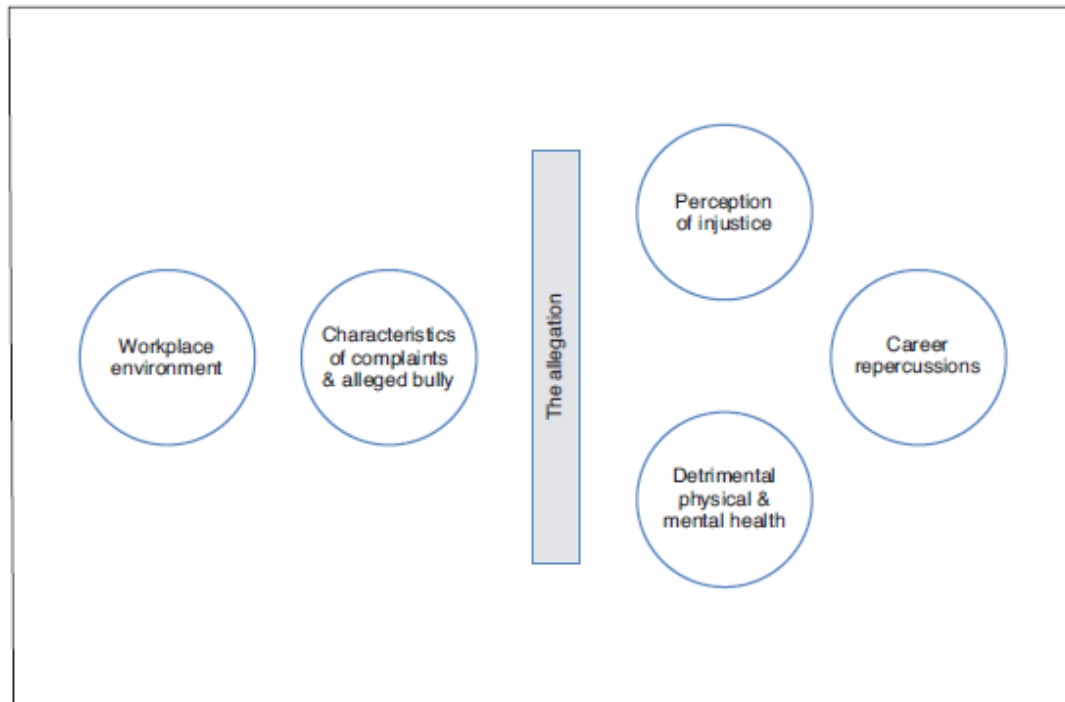
*Figure 8.11.* Initial themes: Repercussions.

At this stage of analysis, a collection of 11 subthemes developed from the individual codes were made up. These initial themes were then further refined and reviewed to make up the final six themes in the analysis.

### **8.1.3 Reviewing and defining themes**

Six main themes were developed from the initial themes that were described above, to represent the final thematic map. While these are portrayed as separate elements in Figure 8.12, there was significant overlap between each theme as each had an influence on the other. The final thematic map is represented in a sequential manner from left to right in order to illustrate the development and consequences of

the bullying allegations. The allegations themselves emerged as a separate theme and were influenced both by the *workplace environment* and the *characteristics of the complainant and alleged perpetrator*. The way the allegations were made also influenced the themes of *perception of injustice* and *health consequences*. The interactions and connections between each theme will be discussed later.



*Figure 8.12.* Final thematic map of the experiences of participants following an allegation of workplace bullying.

As illustrated in Figure 8.1.2, six main themes emerged from the analysis of the interview transcripts. These were 1) *workplace environment*, 2) *characteristics of the complainant and the perpetrator*, 3) *the allegations themselves*, 4) *perceptions of injustice*, 5) *detrimental psychological and physical health* and 6) *career repercussions*. Each of these themes explained the bullying allegations from the

perpetrators' perspective. The themes are spatially presented in a manner that depicts the antecedents or background of the allegation (*Workplace environment and Characteristics of the complainant and alleged bully*) and consequences of the allegation itself (*Perceptions of injustice, Detrimental physical and mental health and Career repercussions*). The allegation is depicted as the dividing line between the risk factors (antecedents) and the repercussions of the allegation.

## **8.2 Theme 1: Workplace Environment**

As expected, conflict within the work environment, including allegations of inappropriate behaviours targeting the alleged perpetrators, as well as role ambiguity were central to a workplace environment in which the bullying allegation emerged. These subjects were described by all of the participants. The different types of behaviours reported, supported the expectation that participants would report a working environment that reflected high levels of stress, conflict and inappropriate social behaviours. The *workplace environment* represented a major theme in the final thematic analysis and could be broken down into both organisational and social antecedents, as reflected in the initial codes and subthemes.

### **8.2.1 Organisational environment**

The interviews with the participants highlighted negative and stressful working environments in which the allegations of bullying were made. Within this environment, industrial issues were raised by some of the participants as contributing to the complaint made against them. For example, one participant reported that at the time the bullying allegation was made against her, she was performing a number of

roles that she believed were outside her job description and that she acknowledged were contributing to her behaving in an aggressive manner towards her staff:

I was also finding it a very stressful time. The workload was huge. My job really should have been done by two people ... I started having to cover for doctors as well, so therefore I didn't have doctors in the emergency department, I didn't have doctors seeing mental health patients on the wards and I had to do both in each area, I also had the management aspect of my job and so I was sort of working long hours. (Nurse Manager)

The nurse in the transcript above describes a working environment that was short-staffed and where she was working long hours, carrying out a number of roles, including having to carry out jobs that would normally be carried out by the medical staff and executing a managerial role.

In the next transcript, the participant described the complainant as a casual worker, who had poor job security and had to suffer a reduction in hours without a corresponding relaxation in sales' targets. The participant explained this in the following words:

Now they (the employees) have sales they have to get. They have referrals they have to get. They are all employed on a casual basis. Recently, a fortnight ago I had one young girl she's been with me for almost a year, she was told in a staff meeting about 6-7 months ago that everybody's hours were going to be reduced because the company wasn't making money and I said to this girl ... I suggest that you look for another job to supplement your income. I started getting customer complaints that she wasn't doing her job, that she wasn't paying attention to the members and things like that and I told her this, and I further reduced her hours ... On Tuesday of the following week her mother rang up the owner of the club and all he said to me was I was bullying her daughter and that her working conditions were made a living hell. (Middle Manager, fitness industry)

The transcript above reflects an industrial climate where poor and stressful working conditions contributed to the complaint of bullying being made. All employees were employed on a casual basis and had to reach sales' targets each week. Due to the financial difficulties the club was facing a number of staff had their hours cut and the complainant had her hours cut further following complaints by customers.

As well as the *organisational environment* emerging as an important antecedent in most of the bullying allegations, ongoing interpersonal conflict and poor communication between workers was another factor that contributed to the poor environment. The following transcript identifies conflicts between senior staff that resulted in a senior staff member supporting a complaint of bullying made by a worker against the participant:

I guess the undermining behaviour by the second in charge is still going on. It is still very much going on ... and some false information was provided to the regional manager (RM) and he ran with it ... But since then, he has listened to the business manager who is not a great supporter of me. What the second in charge does now is that he goes to the business manager and talks to him who then relays the information to the regional manager and I said to the RM in front of the business manager I want the business manager to be taken totally out of the equation. He is a business manager in charge of a totally different team and systems. If the second in charge has a problem I want him to go directly to me. Not to go through a third party. (Middle Manager, government department)

This transcript illustrates the high level of conflict that is present among the senior manager team. The participant talks about undermining behaviours' that contributed to a complaint of bullying against him and describes the conflict within



the senior leadership team. From his perspective the 'second in charge' is making complaints about him through another senior manager and the level of conflict is such that the participant is finding it difficult to know who is telling the truth. These transcripts cited above all reflect the high levels of conflict that were present in a stressful work environment occupied by the accused bullies. It is interesting to note that the accused bullies attributed this environment as being outside of their control.

### **8.2.2 The social environment**

Around 10% of the participants also referred to a workplace *social environment* as contributing to allegations of workplace bullying being made against them. Unlike the industrial environment that was viewed as being outside their control, a number of the participants actively promoted a social environment that contributed to the bullying accusation. They viewed the complainant's interpretation of their behaviour or the *social environment* as over-reacting or misinterpreting the social behaviours. One participant described promoting a social culture at work in which inappropriate language and sexual jokes were the norm. He had little insight into how inappropriate his behaviour or managerial style was. He reported that he had been accused of sending inappropriate e-mail and sexualised and homophobic photos to his staff. Despite being dismissed for his conduct, he still had a very poor understanding of how inappropriate his behaviour was. He said the following:

There was an e-mail which only contained a colourful word or two. ... as you can see, 100% work-related and not malicious in any sense. I think during the dismissal meeting they highlighted that I had used the word *cock*, which was just a general slang term that I call the other two guys in the office, so, and I've used that kind of language quite frequently over the past three and half

years in working with the colleague, and no one has ever said or mentioned anything. (Middle Manager, private organisation)

The e-mail that the participant refers to is reproduced below (all identifying information has been removed).

From:

Sent:

To:

Subject:

Boys,

If you two cocks are cool with a [...] visit from the 18th to 22nd August (depart Sunday night, return either Friday night or during the weekend), let me know and we'll get the ball rolling on this.

Cheers

He justified his actions by stating the following:

I am very professional when need be, but when there is no one in the office I kind of make it a very casual environment which is kind of how we achieve our best work. So we kind of do that via e-mail or we do that verbally. Sometimes I can call it kind of like a pub environment for want of a better word because it is very laid back and casual. (Middle Manager, private industry)

His comments and e-mail above suggest that the participant supported and promoted a workplace environment that was permissive of inappropriate behaviours. He appeared to have little insight into how inappropriate his behaviour was and defended himself by reporting that he was professional when he needed to be, but when no clients were present he promoted a 'pub environment'. Below are examples

of the pictures this particular participant sent to his staff. Identifying features have been removed from the photos, but they further illustrate the type of social environment being encouraged.



*Figure 8.13.* Example 1 of image sent by e-mail.



*Figure 8.14.* Example 2 of image sent by e-mail.



*Figure 8.15.* Example 3 of image sent by e-mail.

As illustrated in the case described above, the social environment promoted by the participant and illustrated by the photos was inappropriate and unprofessional, and resulted in his dismissal after a workplace bullying and sexual harassment complaint was lodged against him. Despite being dismissed from his job and losing an unfair dismissal case he bought against his employer, the participant displayed little insight into how the social environment that he promoted could contribute to a staff member feeling intimidated or humiliated by his actions. He reported not meaning to humiliate or embarrass anyone and said that his actions were not targeted at a specific staff member. He did not believe that he was sexually harassing or intimidating his staff, as nobody complained to him about his behaviour. He believed the complainant was out to get him by making allegations against his behaviour.

Not only was the participant's actions, such as sending the photos illustrated above to his staff, calling his staff cocks, promoting a pub environment and

encouraging an unprofessional and inappropriate social environment, his managerial style appeared to be very laissez-faire. His story describes a relationship between a slack management style (as a perpetrator characteristic) and an inappropriate social environment that was created as a result of his management style and behaviours.

This next extract also illustrates a workplace social culture where the managers' sense of humour contributed to a bullying complaint being made against her:

He also said that I was a ~~–sarcastic~~ bitch.” Which is unfortunately a reflection of my sense of humour that didn't work with him, but you know. I was aware of that and I often apologised. You know sometimes I would say flippant things but I was often very conscious that I didn't say anything personal about anybody and it was sort of jokes but there was never a target. They were never targeted at anybody. (Manager of a teaching department)

As described, the participant's sense of humour contributed to a bullying complaint being made against her. It appears from her transcript that she was aware that her sense of humour and jokes were inappropriate at times because she talked about apologising for them. She also defended her behaviour by stating that she never targeted anyone and appeared to have little insight into how her humour or joking could contribute to someone feeling bullied.

Taken together these transcripts reflect a theme where the work environment through poor industrial environment, conflict with subordinates and colleagues, and an inappropriate social culture has contributed to complaints of workplace bullying being made. This background has been identified in previous research that has found similar organisational antecedents to workplace bullying (see section 1.2.8 of this

thesis for a discussion of this literature). However, this is the first study that we are aware of that has identified these antecedents through interviews with the accused bully perpetrators.

### **8.3 Theme 2: Characteristics of the Complainant and the Alleged Perpetrator**

The second major theme to emerge from the analysis was the *characteristics of the complainant and the perpetrator*. These characteristics appeared to interact with the workplace social and industrial environment contributing to the allegation of workplace bullying being made. For example, as described above, the characteristics of the perpetrator as a laissez-faire manager, or a manager exhibiting little insight into his or her own poor behaviours, contributed to an inappropriate social environment that was an antecedent to the bullying allegations. For example, one participant who reported he had been described as a ‘dictator’ appeared to unknowingly contribute to high levels of conflict and poor staff morale. However, in justifying their actions most participants described the complainant’s characteristics in negative terms and reported that the bullying allegation against them was a result of them trying to manage a worker’s poor performance or inappropriate behaviours. Listening to the study participants, it was sometimes difficult to establish who the bully was: the alleged perpetrator or the complainant.

#### **8.3.1 Complainant characteristics**

A major theme emerging from the interviews was that all the participants in the study blamed the complainant for the allegations perpetrated against them. As described in the transcripts cited below, participants justified the accusations of

bullying as the complainant over-reacting to appropriate management direction, or attempts to address behaviour or performance. Participants said they were accused of being a bully when they attempted to discipline a subordinate for poor behaviour or poor performance, or when they were trying to address mental health concerns that were contributing to inappropriate behaviours. There was also a strong subtheme of *upwards bullying*; that is, where the participants believed that the complainant was bullying them. Most participants justified their actions and they saw themselves as victims, with the complainant as the perpetrator.

#### ***8.3.1.1 The complainant's poor behaviours***

Over half of the participants reported that their attempts to address the complainant's poor work performance or behaviour contributed to the bullying complaint made against them. For example, the participant below talked about having to manage the inappropriate behaviour of a staff member, who later registered a complaint of bullying against her:

Because her behaviour was so bad I took disciplinary action against her which meant I did a number of things including putting her on diminished work performance, giving her timeframes to improve her behaviour, I used to have regular counselling sessions with her about her behaviour with other staff (...) so she put in a complaint against me to our ethical standards unit and that started the process of investigation. (Senior Manager, public service organisation)

As described above, from the alleged perpetrator's perspective her actions were reasonable given the circumstances, and she did not view herself as a bully. She reported having to take disciplinary action against a staff member in order to manage poor performance. She viewed the different actions she took (putting her on

diminished work performance, giving her timeframes to improve her behaviour and having regular counselling sessions with her) as reasonable. However, from the complainant's perspective this was bullying, and a formal complaint was lodged against the manager.

### ***8.3.1.2 The complainant's mental health***

Around one third of the participants talked about the complainant having an extreme personality or mental health problem that when challenged, contributed to an allegation of bullying being made against them:

Well I had a worker in my unit who had been, not difficult to manage, but she had quite an extreme personality so I suppose everyone in the unit had their own ways of dealing with her moods and her behaviour. (Middle Manager, private industry)

I had a staff member had had a history of erratic and unusual behaviour, which I was not aware of when I took the position, but became aware of very soon after taking the position. It's since been identified that she has bipolar disease or illness and so the symptoms of her behaviour were bipolar but at the time I didn't know that to be the case so (sic). Because her behaviour was so bad I took disciplinary action against her. (Senior Manager, public service)

As illustrated in the two transcripts cited above, both of these participants described having to manage behaviours resulting from difficult personalities or mental health problems of subordinates. For example, in the first extract the participant discusses a staff member who had an extreme personality, with a history of erratic moods and behaviours. The second transcript also describes the complainant as having a mental health problem and a bipolar illness that contributed to erratic and unusual behaviour. The action taken by the managers to try to address the behaviours of this group of complainants resulted in a bullying allegation and



subsequent investigation. Both of these transcripts illustrate the difficulties experienced by managers who reported trying to address the disruptive behaviour of ‘difficult’ employees.

Around 15 percent of participants talked about managing complainants who had a stressful home or family life, or ‘other issues’ outside the workplace which may have contributed to them misinterpreting helping behaviour as bullying. This group of participants expressed considerable surprise when the accusation of bullying was made against them, as they believed they had been supporting the complainant through some of their personal concerns:

The claimant was in a great deal of financial and emotional stress for the whole time of her employment. She had breast cancer, a marriage breakdown, an overdose of prescription tranquilisers, a failed relationship with another member of staff and had recently taken out a huge mortgage for a unit which she was finding difficulty in paying. On each of these occasions we found it necessary to spend at least half of our spare time, sometime all of it, counselling her and reassuring her, offering her friendship and support.  
(Middle Manager, private school)

I just couldn’t comprehend how my attempts to coach the employee as to the requirements of the role, the culture of the organisation, monitor workflow and provide feedback could be interpreted as bullying ... He was an intelligent young man with a lot of personal issues. Essentially he was immature and lacking in experience. My impression was that his allegations were more aligned to feelings of dissatisfaction and personal grievances with his role and, in particular, the lack of seniority and decision-making authority. (Middle Manager, not for profit private organisation)

My project manager who was also my ex-partner, told me that she wasn’t coming back to the workplace, that she wanted a separation package ... and then she basically went to see her doctor and I received a WorkCover

prescribed medical certificate saying that she was unwell because of bullying and harassment by the CEO ... It (the bullying allegation) had nothing to do with work. We had a really good working relationship. We had always worked well together so in terms of our working interaction, that was always very positive. It was completely relationship-based, but she brought our breakup into the workplace. (CEO, private organisation)

As described in the three transcripts above, these participants believed that the personal situation of the complainant outside of the workplace contributed to the bullying complaint. In the first transcript the participant talks about a number of personal issues the complainant was going through, including breast cancer, a marriage breakdown, an overdose of prescription tranquilisers, a failed relationship<sup>4</sup>, and reported that she offered significant assistance and friendship during that time. In the second transcript the participant refers to the personal issues<sup>4</sup> that the complainant had. The third transcript describes relationship difficulties between the complainant and the respondent, following a relationship breakdown. In that case, the complainant was also the participant's ex-partner and the animosity in the relationship breakup was brought into the workplace and contributed to the complaint of bullying. The participant said: She brought our breakup into the workplace<sup>4</sup>. These transcripts highlight the influence of the complainants' personal situation outside the workplace that contributed to the workplace bullying complaint.

### ***8.3.1.3 The complainant as a bully—Upward bullying***

Around 20 percent of participants described the complainants as bullies<sup>4</sup> and reported that the complainants exhibited inappropriate and openly hostile behaviours that were difficult to manage and could be labelled workplace bullying. These behaviours were repeated, targeted towards the manager or other employees and

contributed to significant distress. This group of participants reported that the allegation of bullying lodged against was a method of intimidating them further. For example, the transcript below describes the complainant's behaviour as intimidating and bullying:

His behaviour got worse and worse and I went to my manager for support and I said I have tried this, this and this and I have tried a lot of techniques to defuse his behaviour offering him support, and no matter how much I worked on emphasising the good work that he had done, and try to make him feel more confident, but if I said anything that he interpreted as negative he would lose the plot. Yell, rant rave tell me I didn't know anything. Huff and puff; basically made derogatory belittling comments to me (participant crying). Sorry, it still gets me emotional. In effect he was bullying me. He would try to intimidate me to do things his way. It was really bizarre. It was escalating to the point that he would throw a tantrum in the door to my office he would stand up stomp around lean across my desk at me just about spitting in my face and then go storming out down the corridor flinging comments back. (Middle Manager, private organisation)

Many before you have tried. She has had warnings, she has had written warnings by the CEO she has had other warnings and she has breached them. But she stays. It leaves you a bit disillusioned with the strength of the departmental that highest level I consider this is a form of bullying and intimidation of her colleagues. The examples I was giving was how she dominated the office like in team meetings, what's the word ... I can't remember the word I'm thinking over ... she would make quite disparaging comments at times about others, and would be quite intimidating. No one would speak up. And people were frightened of her. It was very obvious. (Middle Manager, public service)

The two transcripts cited above describe some of the behaviours that participants reported were carried out against them. Both of these participants

reported trying to manage an employee who was behaving in an inappropriate manner and was also very intimidating. In their view they were being bullied by the employee. This subtheme of *upward bullying* ties in closely with the subtheme (see section 8.4.1.1) *inappropriate behaviours exhibited by the complainants*. However, it differentiates itself from the former in that in the current subtheme, the complainants' inappropriate behaviours are specifically referred to as *bullying*. For example, in the first transcript cited above, the participant described the complaints behaviour as *bullying*, *intimidating* and *escalating*. The second participant cited above described the complainant's behaviour as *bullying and intimidation* with other staff being *frightened* of her. These two transcripts illustrate the increasing inappropriate behaviours exhibited towards participants by some complainants. Participants described reprisals when trying to address the behaviour. For example, the participant in the first piece of transcript cited, reported that when she tried to address the complainant's behaviour, he would *lose the plot, yell, rant rave and tell me I didn't know anything*. The second participant reported that the complainant had previous warnings about her behaviour, but these had done little to change her behaviour: In these situations, when the participants tried to address the complainant's behaviour or expressed anger at the complainant, they were accused of workplace bullying.

The majority of participants reported being treated negatively or inappropriately by their staff at times and described a range of inappropriate behaviours directed towards them including swearing, spitting, yelling and other overtly confrontational behaviours. Around half of the participants reported that even though they had been accused of bullying themselves, they believed that the

allegations against them were part of a pattern of bullying by a staff member, and in some cases, the bullying complaint procedure was used as a bullying tool to resist change or managerial direction that was unpopular. When asked if she had been bullied, this senior manager said the following:

Absolutely. Absolutely. Absolutely. Oh and I think that most managers that are accused of bullying have, nearly 90% or more, 95% they will tell their story and if you understand the context there will be a group of persons in their team that displays intimidating or threatening behaviour. I have absolutely been bullied. Unions will often do it, or union representatives in a workgroup, or you will find that when me and my counterparts when we get together we will share stories, but there are frequently bullies in the workplace that are never identified as such but who often rally the troops and who make it very difficult for a line manager who is trying to manage the team. (HR Manager, health service)

It is interesting that the participant cited above reports that she believes that most managers have been bullied by their staff. However, she also reports that unions will bully and union representatives in a workgroup will bully, and staff who rally the troops and who make it very difficult for a line manager who is trying to manage the team are carrying out bullying behaviours. The type of behaviour that she talks about is very different from the behaviours described in the earlier transcripts, where staff were described as targeting the manager and yelling, raving, intimidating, swearing, spitting and carrying out other overtly intimidating and hostile behaviours, that often escalated over time. Within the context of the transcript cited above, the term *bullying* may be being used in a more liberal sense than intended in the recognised definition.

The two excerpts below describe how bullying is used as a method of opposing changes or unpopular management direction. Both of these participants acknowledge that most managers don't complain that they are being bullied, but report that resistance and managing inappropriate behaviours from staff are at times, part of their job:

I was the nurse manager for [name of organisation] and so I had a fairly large staff ... What we were discovering in that department was that they used bullying accusations as a way of stopping you from managing and it had developed into a bit of a tool so I was quite confident right from the beginning that there had been no bullying. (Senior Nurse, private hospital)

Part of me was disillusioned in that thinking I am a manager and so I have to deal with it. It is almost that culture where you think ... I am a manager it would be almost weak to say my staff is bullying me. Silly but ... In the end I probably could have put in a complaint about her bullying me but I got to the point with this whole mess I just wanted to get away, I just wanted to leave. I just didn't want to see her again. (Middle Manager, public service)

These excerpts describe the attitude that some participants had in believing that putting up with inappropriate behaviours from staff was a normal part of their job as a manager. The participant quoted above believed that she was being bullied, but was reluctant to put in a complaint against her subordinate because she thought that she may be viewed as being weak to admit that she was being bullied. Her attitude was that she 'just has to deal with it' and reflects an outlook expressed by a number of participants. It appeared that a number of the participants, all who were in managerial positions, believed that they had to put up with a certain amount of poor behaviour and that it was their job to manage the behaviour of subordinates. If they were intimidated by it, or could not manage it appropriately, this was a reflection of their

poor ability to manage effectively. Due to this, a significant amount of upward bullying was unreported by managers.

### **8.3.2 Characteristics of the perpetrator**

#### ***8.3.2.1 Justifying bullying as normal managerial behaviour***

The behaviours carried out by the participants were all justified as appropriate actions. Eleven of the 30 participants who completed the surveys wrote additional comments on the questionnaires justifying the negative acts they carried out as reasonable managerial actions:

- I had to force myself to discipline staff.
- I have criticised a staff member's work in relation to performance of their duties when I felt it was necessary to ensure work is performed.
- I have asked someone to carry out tasks outside their job description because my manager required me to do this.
- I have excessively monitored somebody's work because I was asked by a senior manager to do so.
- Some of these statements (negative acts) cover the normal duties of a manager.
- There were times when I would have to set standards and monitor performance but this was always done in consultation with the employee with the aim to bringing the work up to a satisfactory standard.
- I have asked someone to do work below their level of competence but only if it was within the employee's job description.

These citations above highlight the belief by these participants that at times they had to ask subordinates to carry out unpopular tasks, or discipline and performance-manage staff as part of their role. However, they believed this behaviour was necessary at times and was a part of their managerial duties. Comments written by these participants and others, on their Negative Acts Questionnaires, reflect their concern that the negative acts they reported carrying out may be interpreted as bullying or unreasonable behaviours. The additional comments highlight one of the problems with relying solely on checklists of negative behaviours to assess frequency and rate of workplace bullying. As, what may be considered a negative behaviour in one context (i.e. from an employee's point of view), may be considered an appropriate behaviour (while unpopular) from another point of view.

#### ***8.3.2.2 Perpetrators' behaviour influencing the workplace environment***

The *perpetrators' behaviours and characteristics* are closely related to the themes of *workplace social environment* described earlier in this chapter. As the perpetrators were in managerial positions, their behaviours appeared to be both influenced by *the environment* and also influenced *the environment*. For example, the nurse manager, quoted below, described working in a very stressful work environment and said that her staff were starting to tell her that she was becoming aggressive. However, she justified her behaviour as reacting to a stressful workplace and having to manage a number of jobs and roles within her position:

People started to comment that I was getting aggressive and I said well what do you mean by that? They are saying oh you are just very short with us all the time and I'm saying well I don't mean to be. (Nurse Manager)



Although the nurse manager cited above reported that she did not mean for her behaviour to come across as aggressive, she said that staff were informing her that she was short with them all the time. However she attributed her aggressive behaviour as outside her control, but caused by the high levels of stress that she was under.

Both the participants below describe a style of humour or laissez-faire style of management that contributed to the bullying allegation made against them:

He also said that I was a –sarcastic bitch.” He actually used those words. Which is unfortunately a reflection of my sense of humour that didn’t work with him, but you know. I was aware of that and I often apologised. (Manager of a teaching department)

I am very professional when I need to be, but when there is no one in the office, I kind of make it a very casual environment which is how we achieve our best work. Sometimes I can call it kind of like a pub environment for want of a better word because it is very laid back and causal. (Middle Manager, private industry)

Neither of the participants cited above appeared to recognise the impact of their inappropriate management style or humour on their staff. The middle manager in private industry talked about promoting a casual ‘pub environment’ and the manager of a teaching department described her sense of humour as offending other staff. Neither participant appeared to have insight into the effects their behaviour had on others. However, in behaving the way they did, these participants promoted a social environment that was inappropriate and intimidating for some workers.

Other participants were accused of exhibiting specific discrete behaviours such as ignoring the complainant, talking in a derogatory manner about someone, not walking to a staff meeting with someone, cutting a staff member off before they had

finished speaking, constantly looking at their watch during a meeting and a number of other discrete behaviours. A few examples follow:

There were a number of allegations. (She said) I did not return her greetings; limited conversations with this person; ceased talking when she entered the room; I verbally attacked her over a particular matter; I bombarded her with work requests after she returned from a sick day and she felt unsupported and that I did not believe she had been ill and I made allegations about a decline in her work performance to senior staff without indicating previously to her that there were concerns. None of these accusations were able to be substantiated. (Senior Teacher)

But I got accused of bullying her by ignoring her. That I wouldn't tell her things that went on in meetings that she had made complaints before and they weren't resolved. I can't even remember what they all were, and that if she walked past and said good morning I wouldn't respond to her and whatever, it was just a whole lot of things like that. (Senior Manager, banking industry)

The first one was saying that I had talked loudly about a another employee in a derogatory way, and the second one was because I sent a letter identifying mistakes in a research report that had been done by one person whose projects that I had inherited. They said by sending the letter to the other team leaders I had bullied this other woman. (Middle Manager, private research industry)

The three transcripts above describe some specific behaviour that these participants were accused of: These behaviours were common accusations in many of the transcripts and they could all be placed in the category of poor communication styles that contributed to the complainant feeling unsupported and in some cases attacked. Specific behaviours included accusations of verbally attacking the complainant, ignoring a staff member, appearing distracted and responding in a negative manner. For example, in the transcript above, the middle manager from the

research industry describes being accused of bullying because she talked to an employee in a derogatory way and sent a letter identifying mistakes in a research report to the research team. The first and second participants cited above were accused of a number of behaviours that suggest an aggressive communication style. The allegations also mainly referred to work-related issues in terms of giving the complainant too much work, not supporting the complainant and managing work performance in an aggressive or unsupportive manner. All of these behaviours reflect poor communication styles that impacted on the recipient. It was interesting to note that none of the participants were accused of bullying behaviours that impacted on the complainant's personal life (such as spreading rumours about their personal lives, gossip); rather, the behaviours they were accused of were all work-related negative acts.

## **8.4 Theme 3: The Allegation**

### **8.4.1 Different types of conflicts labelled as *bullying***

As described above, participants in the study identified a number of different types of conflicts that contributed to the bullying allegations made against them. The majority of the conflicts were interpersonal, including conflicts with colleagues, subordinates, conflicts related to discrete behaviours or work performance. However, the three transcripts cited below illustrate that, at times, the complaint of bullying was not against an individual perpetrator because of what *they had done*, but because the alleged perpetrator represented organisational processes or ways of doing things that the complainant did not like. For example, part of the allegation against the manager below was that she had not reclassified a group of workers who believed they should be being paid at a higher level. Other participants described similar types

of complaints about organisational practices and policies that formed part of the complaint:

It was about a 14-page letter signed by three administrative staff who were very aggrieved about their treatment ... a whole series of things around unequal treatment. They felt that they should have been reclassified and weren't, they felt they hadn't been effectively listened to, failure to consult, and a whole raft of things. (Senior Manager, health services)

She was going on leave that following day and she sent me an e-mail that day with a list of things that I had done wrong ... Even things that were nothing to do with me, such as the car-booking system that she didn't like, things that were totally irrelevant to the current situation. (Middle Manager, private industry)

It started off as questioning the culture of the organisation ... She was sort of saying you shouldn't be doing it this way, you should be doing it that way, and people didn't agree with that and so we sat down. (Senior Manager, private organisation)

As illustrated in the three transcripts above, the alleged perpetrators reported little personal responsibility for a number of the concerns or behaviours that were raised in the bullying complaint against them. The alleged perpetrators were being held accountable for organisational practices that they were not personally responsible for. For example, in the first transcript, failing to reclassify a group of administration staff, in the second transcript the complainant's concerns over the car-booking system, and in the third excerpt of transcript, the complainant was expressing unhappiness with the culture of the organisation and the way 'we did things as a team'. The three transcripts above illustrate some different types of non-personal grievances that were included in bullying allegations and that were labelled as *bullying* by complainants.

The nature of these complaints as part of a bullying allegation suggests that the complainants were aggrieved by more than the individual perpetrator's behaviour, but by policies and processes within the organisation and the way they were being treated within the wider organisational culture. These transcripts reflect the link between organisational environment and bullying complaints.

The allegation itself was a major theme within the interviews. The participants all talked about the allegations that were made against them and different methods the complainants used to accuse them of bullying. Despite describing a stressful working environment and more often than not, a history of conflict between themselves and the complainant, most participants reported being very surprised that they had been accused of bullying.

#### **8.4.2 Method of complaint**

All participants reported that their organisation had a workplace bullying and harassment policy and complaint procedure. However, complainants did not always utilise this complaint procedure to make the bullying allegations: Two participants reported that the complainant made the allegation via their union, bypassing the organisation's bullying policy and complaint procedures. A third found out about the allegation against them when approached by WorkCover in relation to a worker's compensation stress claim that had been lodged as a result of allegations of bullying, or were contacted by SafeWork S.A who was independently investigating an allegation of bullying that had been lodged with them.

The majority of the participants received notification of a complaint against them through their organisation's HR department:

Well, the first thing I knew about being accused of bullying was I was summoned to a meeting with HR and heard that a complaint had been made against me ... this was the written complaint and there were four allegations in it. (Middle Manager, call centre)

And then out of the blue the head of the HR department wanted to see me, and she told me that she had had received a written complaint from this young man and he had accused me of bullying. I was absolutely devastated. (Middle Manager, public service)

Both of the participants cited in the transcripts above report that they found out about the allegations against them through the organisation's HR department. In the larger organisations this was usually the case, and complaints of bullying were usually lodged through the HR department. Even if the complainant complained via the union, the union usually contacted the HR department to lodge the complaint in the first instance. Stress claims from WorkCover were also lodged with the organisation via the HR department, as too were notifications by SafeWork SA (the state's occupational health and safety supervisory body). In the smaller agencies, or if the accused was a senior member of staff, it was not unusual for the complaint to be addressed directly to them. For example, the participant cited below received a letter from Safe Work SA alleging that the organisation, and she as the personal respondent, was accused of bullying:

I was unaware that she had put in a bullying complaint against me until I received a letter from SafeWork SA. Saying that there had been a case of workplace bullying. It just stated that there had been a claim of workplace bullying against our organisation, and myself in particular. (Director, child-care organisation)

As described in the transcript above, some participants received notification that they had been accused of bullying directly from the investigating agency. These

allegations were made against both the organisation (who is ultimately responsible for OHSW) and the person named as the accused bully (the personal respondent) in the allegation.

Complainants also used a number of other avenues in which to make their complaint, even if the organisation had a written bullying complaints' procedure. For example, the participant below reported that one of his staff had presented the Vice-President with a written complaint alleging workplace bullying during an exit interview:

And so she went in, saw the vice president and said that (a) she was resigning and (b) she was resigning on the basis of being harassed and bullied by myself and she presented him with what I think was about a six or seven page letter, finely typed border to border of accusations against me ... (Senior Manager; multinational private industry)

Another participant reported that initially the complaint against him was made anonymously and he did not find out the nature of the allegations until the official enquiry was conducted:

Obviously at some point he took it upon himself to accuse me, informally at first, and then the old unsigned note to the person who was two levels above me, accusing me of bullying him and as a result an enquiry was carried out. (Public Servant, posted overseas)

These transcripts illustrate the different methods that complainants used to make their complaint of bullying. All of these complaints were through written allegations (although some were preceded by verbal complaints) and utilised key people, such as the HR department, the Vice-President, senior managers or external government agencies to complain. Even the anonymous unsigned complaint described in the transcript above was given to the accused bully's senior manager.

However, unlike the allegations that came directly from the complainant themselves, one participant reported that she was accused of bullying indirectly, through an official warning. She said that she is unsure who made the complaint against her, but the actual official warning had been compiled by the manager:

I got an official warning letter which said I was in breach of section 2 and 3 of the Equal Opportunity and Harassment Policy in our company. We had a meeting and I had to ask what it was that I had done [because] I had no idea, and there were two complaints. There are three other team leaders and I spoke to the other team leaders and they said that there were no complaints. What happened was after my boss received the (report, I wrote) they were told that he was going to reprimand me with an official warning letter and he said he believed that the report I wrote was bullying. (Middle Manager, private industry)

This participant reported not knowing what she had done wrong, as she had not seen any specific allegations. She said she wrote a report about a project that she inherited after the previous manager had left the workplace. After circulating the report, which contained a number of criticisms about the project, she was accused of workplace bullying. She was distressed that she had not been provided with an opportunity to provide her side of the story prior to being given an official warning in relation to the report she had written. She was also distressed that the specific behaviours she was being warned about were not detailed, but the warning letter broadly accused her of breaching the organisation's Equal Opportunity and Harassment Policy, without providing examples of the actual behaviours.

Around 15 % of participants were made aware of the allegations against them only when the complainant made a worker's compensation stress claim and cited workplace bullying as the cause of their injury and the participant as the bully.



Despite some participants' reporting a history of conflict between themselves and the complainant, the investigation of a stress claim by WorkCover was often the first time that the participant was aware that they had been accused of bullying:

And in fact I made my first performance-management meeting with them and within three weeks, they both went out on sick leave, and didn't turn up for their performance-management meeting, and then they constantly sort of took sick leave, and it took about two months, then they both put in a WorkCover claim against me. (Senior HR Manager, educational institute)

The participant cited above only found out about the workplace bullying allegations when WorkCover informed her that an investigation into a worker's compensation claim was being conducted and she had been named as being responsible for the workplace injury. It is interesting that this particular participant is a senior HR manager, and it may be that the complainants did not feel confident in utilising the organisation's bullying complaint procedure, as any complaint would normally be forwarded to her in the first instance. The allegation was therefore lodged via a stress claim. Other complainants made their allegations directly to Safe Work SA, which is the statutory agency that oversees workplace occupational health and safety in South Australia. As bullying is now part of the OHSW legislation in most states in Australia, employees can make complaints of bullying directly to Safe Work SA. The participant reported the following:

I was unaware that she had put in a bullying complaint against me until I received a letter from Safe Work SA. Saying that there had been a case of workplace bullying. I was not aware of this what so ever. The initial letter just stated workplace bullying. Even the letter was very, very brief. It just stated that there had been a claim of workplace bullying against our organisation, and myself in particular, and it took a lot of documents to get

any information what so ever. It didn't even say what the specific behaviours were. (Director, child-care centre)

The participant cited above reported that she first heard about the allegations of bullying against her when she received a letter from Safe Work SA saying they would be investigating a complaint of bullying made against the organisation and naming her as the personal respondent. She reported that the initial letter did not name the specific allegations that she was accused of, but these were later revealed during the investigation. Again, this was the director of a small organisation and the complainant may have felt that complaining externally through a government agency would result in a fairer investigation of the allegations.

Two participants, who worked for public-service organisations, reported that they worked in highly unionised workplaces, and the complaint against them was made via the union:

She was the union rep at that time so she complained to the union. She made a formal complaint. A written complainant to the union. She accused me of shouting at her, yea. (Middle Manager, public service)

She objected to that to the union. I was unaware, but she actually gathered up the other three people and got like a cumulative approach to the union got 4 people objecting about me to the union, objecting to me as a manager, objecting to my performance as a manager. They got the union to write to our CEO demanding a meeting behind closed doors about me without me present ... So anyway, they went ahead and had the meeting with the CEO. My point was that they should have never even agreed to the meeting without talking to me. The process was undertaken incorrectly. I wasn't involved in the process at all. (Middle Manager, public service)

It is interesting that in both the transcripts cited above, the complaint was made via the complainant's trade union. Both public-service organisations had a bullying

and harassment complaint procedure in place, but the complainants utilised support from the union and made the complaint through the union representative. As described in the second transcript, the way that the complaint was made placed the alleged perpetrator in an unfair position because the union representative requested the initial meeting be held behind closed doors without the accused bully being present. She believed that the organisation's bullying grievance process was not followed, but that the organisation had little choice but to go along with the union demands.

The transcripts cited above all illustrate the different ways in which the bullying complaints were lodged. While all participants reported that their organisation had a bullying and harassment policy and complaint procedure, a number of complaints were not lodged through this mechanism, but lodged during exit interviews; with external government agencies or via a WorkCover stress claim. Others were lodged with union support. One was lodged anonymously. Just because an organisation had a bullying and harassment policy and complaint procedure did not mean that the bullying complaint would be lodged via this mechanism. It may be that the more senior the alleged perpetrator, the less likely the complainant will utilise the internal complaint system. This may be because complainants view senior staff as having more power and influence and therefore as being more likely to manipulate the complaint process. Complaining outside the organisation or receiving trade-union advocacy may be one way that complainants can be assured of having an unbiased investigation into their allegations. This warrants further investigation.

### 8.4.3 Surprise

There was a strong theme of *surprise* that ran through around half the transcripts. Again, *surprise* was linked to the broader theme of the allegation itself. It was also linked to the themes relating to the antecedents of the bullying complaint, because although a number of participants discussed the presence of conflict as an antecedent to the complaint, they were still surprised that a complaint of bullying had been lodged against them. However, some participants reported not being aware that the complainant had any concerns with their behaviour at all.

The two transcripts cited below illustrate this theme *surprise* despite a history of conflict between the parties being present:

I was absolutely gobsmacked. It was ... I was had no idea. I knew I was sort of having trouble communicating with him, but I had no idea that where it had gone to. I subsequently found out that he hadn't been having lunch with us because he couldn't stand me or whatever it was, so having taken the approach to that of live and let live it was sort of you know, I was astounded. (Senior Teacher)

Another participant reported *surprise* despite a history of conflict between herself and the complainant:

Anyway, out of the blue ... but things were strained between us, there is no doubt about that. And I was struggling with how to make it better, I was shocked and devastated and for a few minutes, after I had gone home, was totally inconsolable because I thought all the efforts I had been putting into this young man sort of trying to really get him to perform well in this role, it was like this was like an absolute smack in the face. (Middle Manager, public service)

Both of these transcripts describe the *surprise* felt when the participants found out they had been accused of bullying, despite both participants reporting a history of conflict with the complainant. The senior teacher in the first transcript discusses the communication difficulties she was having with the complainant and the manager in the second transcript talked about the relationship being *strained*; however, neither expected to be accused of workplace bullying.

However, not all participants reported having a strained relationship with the complainant and about a third of participants reported *surprise* at the allegation because they thought that the relationship with the complainant was positive, despite having to manage some previous performance problems:

This was the first that I have heard of any problem she had with me. From my perspective [our relationship was] quite open, forthright, candid although in the weeks and months leading up to her lodging the grievance I had to ... My attention had been drawn to some performance issues that I had worked through with her in a way that I thought that she was accepting of what we discussed. Then I was told about it [the complaint] and I was told that it was going to be referred to a consultant for investigation. I was really upset, because I didn't think that the complaint in its terms warranted formal investigation. [Participant crying] (Middle Manager, private organisation)

I actually thought I had a pretty good relationship with this person. I had no indication that she felt anything against me or that I had done anything to her. We had regular coaching sessions and nothing come up after that. There hadn't been any performance issues; we had just had the regular coaching things. (Middle Manager, private organisation)

I was really shocked and surprised because I had been working really closely with her over those eight weeks and made sure she was getting a good induction. I kept following up every couple of days how things were going ... On the Friday I had been out in the car with her, showing her different things,

sites and that and we were having a chat and she was telling me what she was up to over the long weekend and I asked how things were going and she didn't say anything to me about any problems. She said I was over-managing her. She felt that I was unrealistic in what I was asking her to do. I've never had a complaint against me before in my whole career and so I was in shock. I said to her that I am totally shocked. (Senior Manager, local government)

All of the managers cited above talked about having a positive relationship with the complainant prior to the allegation being made and about being surprised that a complaint was made against them. However, as illustrated in the transcripts cited, there was often a background of performance problems that the participant alludes to. For example, in the transcripts cited above, the participant makes mention of prior performance issues, or having had coaching sessions with the complainant. The third participant cited above reported shock and surprise at being accused of over-managing a new employee and was not aware that the complainant had any concerns over her management style.

This theme of *surprise* illustrates the lack of insight that some accused bullies might have about how their behaviour, communication or management style impacts on their subordinates. Even when previous conflict has been present, most participants in the study were surprised that they were accused of being a bully.

## **8.5 Theme 4: Impact on Health**

### **8.5.1 Negative impact on participants' health**

A major theme to emerge from the qualitative analysis was the negative impact of the allegations on the participants' health. Half of the participants reported taking time off work because of anxiety, depression, stress or being diagnosed with a

specific psychological disorder. At the time of the study, one participant reported being on worker's compensation leave because of psychological injury as a result of being accused of bullying and that they had been unable to work for the last 10 months despite being found not guilty of the allegations. Another two participants were in the process of applying for worker's compensation as a result of sustaining a psychological injury by being accused.

Participants described a number of physical as well as psychological concerns that they associated with being accused of bullying or harassment. These concerns were reported by *all* participants independently of whether they were found guilty or not guilty of the allegation, with around two thirds of participants reporting significant mental health issues. The participant cited below was a senior manager in a multinational firm. He retired early, shortly after being found not guilty of sexual harassment and bullying:

It was the worst period of my entire life. I suffered a racing heart—my blood pressure escalated; I experienced my first ever panic attack; I had a continual pressure in my chest; I could not eat; I felt I could trust no one; I became deeply depressed. (Senior Manager, private industry)

His transcript illustrates the physical and psychological impact of the allegation reported by the majority of the participants. He describes the physical components of anxiety, such as racing heart, increased blood pressure, as well as having his first ever panic attack. He later talked about feeling suicidal and described the bullying allegation and subsequent investigation as the worst period in my life.

A number of other participants also talked about contemplating suicide during this period of their lives:

It affected me severely. I became suicidal. Seriously, I was devastated, mortified, and began to question what I had done, and to whom. (Senior Manager, private industry)

Well the psychologist refers to it as “post-traumatic stress.” The other psychiatrist said that it was an “acute anxiety disorder” or something along the lines of that. Well initially I was depressed. I just couldn’t sleep. There were also self-harm issues and I was thinking about suicide. (Middle Manager, public service)

I’d reached a point where I sat in my office one day and I could understand how people could kill themselves and I just sat there and I was crying and for about three hours I sat there and I looked at the ceiling and I thought it would be really easy because I had bars across there and I said gee that would be so easy and then I am sitting there and I suddenly realised what I was doing and I am thinking this is madness. (Nurse Manager)

The participants in the three transcripts above all reported serious psychological effects of the bullying allegation and discussed how they had contemplated suicide as a result of the distress they were feeling. They all described significant anxiety, depression and thoughts of self-harm and suicidal ideation. None of the participants cited in these transcripts were receiving any support from their organisation in relation to the allegations against them. Many participants reported having to control or mask this distress in front of staff and family.

### **8.5.2 Regulating emotions**

Owing to the impact on emotional and physical health that was reported by participants, about a third talked about specifically controlling their emotional responses to the allegations during the investigation, especially at work. One participant who was found guilty of bullying described putting on a ‘professional face’ in the following words:



But I also had to ... I felt like I had to show as a team leader in the position that I am in that I am strong enough to deal with something like this, even with the feelings that I had. I felt that if I had fallen apart then they might have looked at me a little differently and possibly thought maybe she shouldn't be in the team leader role; and that I wouldn't be able to cope with it. (Manager, private organisation)

The manager cited above, like others in this study, believed that she had to show that she was strong enough to deal with the allegations and that if she displayed her distress at work she would be thought of as incapable of carrying out her job in a professional manner. This *regulation of emotion* by the managers in the study was a common theme and those that continued to work during the investigations all reported similar sentiments. These participants reported continuing to have to regulate their emotions after the investigation had ended—whether they were found guilty or not of the bullying allegation. In the example cited below, the participant who was cleared of the bullying allegations reported how she continued to work during the investigation into her behaviour:

I just ... I don't know. I just basically gritted my teeth and went in there and did my job. I tried to be as normal as possible and it was incredibly hard and I obviously didn't succeed particularly well. In hindsight I wish that I had gone and sought some counselling to deal with it. But I just kept it to myself and sort of gritted my teeth ... I felt as if I should have been able to manage it on my own. (Middle Manager, public service)

Another said:

Well I didn't express anything at work. I didn't say anything, I didn't show any anger, I didn't try and talk to other people there about how I was feeling. I just kept everything to myself internally. (Senior Manager, private industry)

I had to do that [control my emotion]. [Crying]. It takes a lot of energy to face the day and say you have to go to work [crying, and finding it difficult to talk] ... and it takes a lot of effort to smile to my kids, especially at the beginning because they could also feel my stress. But I have to go to work. I have to create a positive environment. It's hard ... self-control. I channel my anger into my projects and since my warning I was always ... I always perform well but like I always almost ... like working too hard to basically block out the emotion. I would always be doing 125% or more. If I was busy then I didn't have to think about anything. It's really hard ... but I have to.  
(Middle Manager, private industry)

Again, these transcripts cited above describe the emotional regulation carried out by about a third of the participants in the study. As expressed in the transcripts above, these participants believed they had to manage their emotions and keep negative emotions, or emotions that might indicate they were not coping, to a minimum. The participants cited above described gritting their teeth, not talking to others, keeping everything to themselves, trying to act as normal as possible and working too hard as strategies they used to regulate their emotions and remain professional. The last transcript illustrates that the emotional regulation did not only happen at work, but also occurred at home, as the accused bully described trying not to let her children notice the distress that she was experiencing.

Participants who were found guilty of the workplace bullying allegations also described having to suppress negative emotions after the results of the investigation were handed down. One participant who had been found guilty of bullying said the following:

Yes, they have accepted her claim and I am still coming to terms with that. That makes me quite angry. They are saying that I did bully her and there are a whole lot of implications from that. ... and I feel like I can't even react

angrily because that would justify the claim in the first place. I feel like I am having to restrain or temper my reactions and my emotions. I have to be really conscious when something comes up in the workplace. I think through it for a longer length of time and more clearly about how I am going to respond to it. Even if it is a simple thing, I just go through it so much more in my head to analyse it and think—if I react in this way or if I respond in this way can't that be construed as bullying. Every action that I take at the moment I go through that process. (Middle Manager, public service)

In the transcript above, the bully describes regulating her anger and her negative reactions at work. She reports thinking through her responses to events carefully before reacting and feeling unable to express negative sentiments, especially her anger, because such reactions may provide justification that the findings of the complaint were warranted. The suppression or regulation of negative emotions is one way in which participants coped with the allegations and with the negative findings against them. However, participants also described a number of other ways of coping with their situations.

### **8.5.3 Ways of coping**

Participants utilised a number of different strategies to cope with the impact of the allegations and investigations. The most common way of coping was through talking to family and friends, although some reported a reluctance to talk too much to their family and reported feeling guilty for burdening them. Other participants found support from colleagues and to a lesser extent through higher management within the organisation. One with a religious background described praying and reported that her faith helped them cope. Some methods participants described as using to cope with the situation were not helpful, and one participant talked about drinking alcohol

as a way of coping with the emotional impact of a complaint against her that was substantiated:

I drank a fair bit of bourbon actually. Yes, I got to say, I didn't drink a lot of bourbon up until that point. (Senior Manager, educational institution)

As illustrated above, the use of alcohol was one way this participant used to cope with the allegations made against her. While the majority of participants reported talking to friends, husbands or colleagues for supports, those that did talk to their partners about how they were feeling also reported feeling guilty for burdening their loved ones. Three participants reported that the stress of the complaint adversely affected their relationship:

The [investigation] process was just horrendous. You know I would go home in a rage, and my home life was disturbed, my husband lived and breathed every minute, every day, every interaction with the person. (Middle Manager, public service)

The participant cited above illustrates that at times partners 'lived and breathed every minute' of what was happening. It appears that while high levels of emotion were regulated at work, some participants released this emotion at home with partners, family and friends receiving the impact of the participant's anger, frustration and distress. While many participants found support by talking to their partners, the next two transcripts illustrate the strain that this placed on many of the relationships:

I spoke to my partner here at home, that was essentially the only support I was getting. She was supportive enough but she's the sort of person as well, who would also play the devil's advocate too to try and understand what had gone on or what had not gone on, so it just left me with a really dirty feeling about myself. (Senior Manager, multinational company)

... in the really intense times I would come home and I would be snappy and it was like I was premenstrual all the time and I would off load to my partner and it got to a point where she said I can't ... I can listen to you but I actually can't take on any more of this. It got difficult for her and that in itself was difficult for me because that was probably my best outlet in a sense because I can be completely honest with her, but she just got to saturation point so when that ... so when she said she couldn't actually deal with any more of it I felt a bit lost then I suppose and it did affect us for quite a few weeks.

(Middle Manager, private industry)

The transcripts cited above describe that the support received at home was at times limited and at times not helpful. Some partners appeared to be overwhelmed by the participant venting their distress or frustration, and others, as described above, played devil's advocate, not providing the support that was required.

However, a minority of participants reported having multiple supports. The participant cited below was able to gain support through the organisation's board of directors, from her family and also from the organisation's employee assistance provider (EAP):

The chairperson gave me lots of support ... But I did feel at the end of the day when I rang them in a blubbery mess, because at the end of the day they are officially my bosses and so I felt obliged to let them know what is going on, but then the emotional side of it you know ... I am here by myself and I felt like I burdened them with my issues but they were there for me, but that's because they are wonderful people. Also my husband was my strength. There really wasn't anyone else I could talk to. There is an organisation called [name of organisation] which supports our industry, and without them I don't know what I would have done. Just to be able to pick up the phone and say help, help. Help I am in the deepest water here and I have got no idea what to do. They went right; let's work it out; and they would help me rationalise

what was going on. Take out the emotion. Help break it down. Point the way ahead, and it was nice to go to them. (Director, child-care organisation)

As described by the participant above, a few participants reported strong support from the workplace and were able to express their emotions and get direction through the different levels of support that they received at work. However, this was rare. The director cited in the transcript above was found not guilty of bullying after an employee claimed worker's compensation for a work-related stress claim, alleging that she had been bullied at work by the director. The director was unable to express distress at work with other staff, but found the board, particularly the chairperson, was supportive. She also gained support from her family and the organisation's employee assistance provider.

One participant talked about her religious beliefs helping her to cope during the period of the investigation. She said that she received informal support from friends outside of the workplace, but received little support from the organisation:

A lot of my inner support came from the fact that I have religious beliefs and that was hugely helpful to me ... at that time I didn't have a partner, boyfriend, so I didn't have anyone to lean on there. I did speak to a few friends about it but that was more discussion, it wasn't really a support thing ... I didn't find much support at all from HR. I didn't really have much contact with them at all, the meetings they did come to, I felt they were very neutral, which I suppose they had to be, that they were there and they would give the perspective of policy and what would happen and I could rely on that, but as for support, that wasn't there. (Middle Manager, public service)

This participant above sites her main support as coming from her religious beliefs. While she did not have an intimate partner to talk to, she reported talking to friends on a superficial level about what was happening at work. It is interesting

while she reports little support from HR, she views this as HR having to be neutral to the investigation.

While participants talked about the different types of support that were given to them within the organisation, unlike the participant cited above, who viewed the lack of support as HR being neutral, the participant below viewed the lack of support by the organisation as unfair, even though she had been informed that the headmaster was not allowed to discuss the investigation for legal reasons:

Well I had support from the other two teachers that I worked with, she had said that one of the others was bullying her as well. It was both of us she named. I got absolutely no help at all from the school administrations or my own manager, or the dean of students or headmaster. They didn't want to know about it in the initial place, and you know when it became a formal thing they said we can't discuss that because it is a formal complaint and we could be subjected to legal action and they just wiped their hands of it. So that was what really grieved me, because I had been working there for 22 years. (Middle Manager, educational institution)

The transcripts above illustrate the different types of support that were available to participants. There were a few participants in this study who reported that they received good informal supports from friends and some colleagues, but no support from the senior management or their own line manager. As described in the transcript above, the participant who had worked at the school for 22 years was aggrieved that she did not receive support from the headmaster and senior staff during the investigation by WorkCover into the bullying allegations. The lack of support in this case was viewed as unfair and grieved the participant. This lack of support contributed to increased perceptions of unfairness experienced by a number of the participants.

## 8.6 Theme 5: Perceptions of Unfairness

### 8.6.1 Injustice

A major theme to emerge from the analysis was the perception of unfairness in the way the organisation managed the complaint. This theme of *unfairness* was also linked closely with the emotional and health consequences of the allegations, because the perception of unfairness appeared to exacerbate the emotional impact of the allegations. The majority of participants, both those found guilty and those found not guilty of bullying, reported that the organisation did not follow the complaint procedures that outlined how allegations were to be investigated. The lack of *procedural justice* contributed to anger, frustration and increased distress. The transcripts referred to below illustrate this theme of *unfairness*. The manager cited in the first transcript was found not guilty of bullying. He described poor *procedural*, *interactional* and *distributive* (outcome) *justice* in relation to the complaint against him:

It was managed completely wrong. At all stages the policy said you have got to try to deal with it at the time, and try to resolve it at the lowest level, but basically there was no chance given to us to try to resolve it at that level. The policy wasn't used at all I don't think. The first thing I heard was well you are stood down, and I was basically told the best way to describe it, was to stay in my room and as a result of that I was sent back to Australia ... And what happened past that was the person who accused me finally put those facts a number of weeks after I had gone home, into writing and then last year, withdrew them. (Middle Manager, public-service organisation, posted overseas at the time of the complaint)

In the transcript above, the participant describes the strong sense of *unfairness* in the way his complaint was managed. He reported that the



organisation's complaints' procedure was not adhered to and that he was not provided with the specific allegations, or given an opportunity to provide his perspective on the complaint. While the policy prescribed addressing the complaint at the lowest level, he reported that he was not given a chance to try to have the matter resolved informally, but a formal investigation was initiated. He was stood down and sent back to Australia from an overseas' posting. While he does not specifically talk about *interactional justice*, his transcript alludes to poor communication and lack of trust between himself and the person/s who were managing the complaint. He reported that eventually the complainant withdrew the complaint against him.

The excerpt below illustrates the link between a sense of *unfairness* in relation to how the complaint was managed. The participant specifically talks about lack of procedural fairness and natural justice:

I was really pissed off at the process used. It was dodgy and completely denied me any procedural fairness and natural justice. I felt as if I had very little natural justice provided to me. There was massive leakage—I was told this situation was highly confidential and I kept to that utterly, telling no one. On the other hand, the two complainants told all and sundry—both within and beyond the organisation—about their complaints and how things were progressing. (Senior Manager, local-government association)

The alleged bully cited above, reported that the investigation process was dodgy' and that he was denied any procedural fairness or justice. He described lack of confidentiality and said that the complainants talked about the allegations both within and outside the organisation and failed to keep the matter private as requested. Following his dismissal, he took the organisation and the two complainants to the

HREOC alleging sexuality discrimination and victimisation. He believed that the bullying allegations against him were vexatious in nature and made because of his sexuality. The case was settled out of court.

In accordance with the above extracts, around one third of the participants reported that they felt that the organisation sided with the complainant, or did not manage the allegation made against them in a fair manner. As illustrated in the transcript below, some participants described feeling bullied themselves by the union or the complainant's advocate. The participant below expresses concerns about the fairness in the complainant process when the union became involved:

They got the union to write to our CEO demanding a meeting behind closed doors about me without me present; I didn't know any of this to start with. ... My point was that they should have never even agreed to the meeting without talking to me. The process was undertaken incorrectly. I wasn't involved in the process at all ... they just bowed down to this person, who is quite powerful in her own right, and bowed down to the union. (Middle Manager, public service)

This extract of transcript describes the participant's sense of *unfairness* in the way the complaint was made through the union, bypassing the organisation's complaint procedures. She believed the organisation *'bowed down'* to union pressure to meet and discuss the allegations behind closed doors. Her sense of *unfairness* was exacerbated by her lack of involvement in the complaint process and by the organisation conceding to what she felt was unfair demands by the union.

This next extract again reflects a sense of injustice and poor procedural fairness and interactional justice that was reflected in a number of the participants'

stories. However, it also describes how having a support person throughout the proceedings can help make the process fairer:

The investigator who was the executive manager ... she acted more like an inquisitor, she didn't let me answer questions, she said oh you have said inappropriate things in the workplace. I said give me some examples. She couldn't. The record of interview was dodgy because she had this person there from her part of the organisation and myself and my general manager who is quite senior in the organisation were present for this. Thank goodness he was one of the people who had to do some of the decision making otherwise I reckon I wouldn't have a job. (Senior Manager, private organisation)

The manager cited above described a number of unfair processes in the investigation including the investigator telling her she had said inappropriate things to the complainant but being unable to provide specific examples. She also described the investigator as an 'inquisitor' who would not let her adequately answer questions. She believed that the record of the interview was 'dodgy', which also contributed to a sense of injustice. However this sense of injustice was lessened by the presence of the general manager who was present during the interview and was part of the decision-making process. This suggests that having the general manager present helped moderate the perception of *unfairness* in relation to the other practices that were perceived to be biased and adversarial.

Some participants referred specifically to the principals of *natural justice* being absent in the investigation. For example, the senior manager cited in the transcript below was found guilty of bullying. However, she reported that the investigation into the allegations against her was biased and was not carried out in accordance with the 'principals of natural justice' or 'procedural fairness'. She

sought legal advice, and at the time she was interviewed, she was in the process of suing her employer:

He basically said that my behaviour and performance is no longer acceptable and that I needed to consider my options. I was just totally shocked. I said I have been here for 16 years and never had any negative feedback ... —Can you give me specific examples?” And he said —Well, no not really.” I said —Are you going to give me something in writing about this?” and he said —No.” ... and by that stage I was in tears and in total shock and I said you know there is no natural justice here or procedural fairness. You have not followed any of the organisation’s policies or processes around any of this. I don’t understand this ... I just didn’t understand what was happening. I couldn’t comprehend this because as a manager I am really aware of all the policies we have, and that we need to follow the policies and procedures set out by the organisation, and so I was quite devastated by this ... and this was done in an open-plan office. (Senior Manager, local government)

As described in the transcript, the participant cited above specifically referred to the lack of natural justice present in the investigation. As with some of the previous participants cited, she referred to the organisation’s workplace bullying complaint procedures not being adhered to. She reported that as a manager she was acutely aware of the policies and procedures of the organisation and the importance of following the procedures correctly. However, this was not carried out, and the lack of procedural justice contributed to her feeling devastated.

Other participants talked about specific types of justice such as *distributive justice* in terms of their reprimand being out of proportion with the findings of the investigation. For example, the participant below who was found not guilty of the bullying allegation, reported that that the punishment handed down to her for a single misdemeanour outweighed the offense she committed:

And that's what hurts, and I find it very difficult that I have been labelled as a bully and a monster and I am now just working my way through putting in an appeal. I am in the process of writing up to the CEO to ask him to consider the level of punishment that I received, that was the only thing that was proven that I on one occasion, I said something—I don't know what, that he found belittling. And that I think the punishment is out of all proportion.

(Middle Manager, private organisation)

The participant cited above described feeling she had been labelled a bully and a monster despite being found not guilty of bullying, but of the lesser charge of making a belittling statement to the complainant on one occasion. She reported that the punishment handed down was out of proportion to these findings. It is interesting that she associates being a 'bully' with being a 'monster,' and although she was not found guilty of bullying per se, in her view the severity of the punishment suggests that she is guilty of bullying and is therefore perceived by others as a monster. She reports appealing the punishment as she believes it is out of proportion to the findings of the investigation.

Three participants, despite being found guilty of bullying, also reported feeling that the judgment against them was unfair and too harsh. The two transcripts below provide a good insight into the participant's perception of poor *procedural justice*, as well as a perception of poor *outcome justice*. Both of the participants cited below took legal action against their employer as a result of their dismissal, which they considered unfair. In the first case the court found that the dismissal was reasonable under the circumstances. In the second case, a settlement was reached between the employer and participant prior to the court hearing. The first participant reported the following:

It was an instant dismissal basically because I was called into a meeting with the chief IT officer and one of the HR representatives. I wasn't given any forewarning, or written notices, no formal warning, no official warning or nothing like that. I was just dismissed after a half an hour meeting. After four and a half years, I am plugging along, being a valuable contributor to the organisation and then in half an hour I am made out to be the worst person in the world. (Middle Manager, private industry)

Anyway, after discussing with the lawyer what were my options because I felt quite strongly I had to stand up for my rights, and the lawyer was saying that basically it is unfair dismissal, what they are doing to you. I felt very strongly about the lack of due process and natural justice and very confident that I had not done anything wrong and that the Chief Executive basically didn't want me there. (Senior Manager, local government)

The participant cited in the first piece of transcript above was instantly dismissed after allegations of bullying and sexual harassment. He had sent sexually explicit and inappropriate photographs to his staff (some of which are illustrated on pages 225 and 226 of this thesis). However, he reported the process that ended his employment was unfair as there was no investigation, and he was given no forewarning or official reprimand prior to being dismissed. He took the organisation to court for unfair dismissal but lost the case, with the judge reporting that the dismissal *was* fair in the circumstances. The second participant also took legal action against her employer after she was dismissed following a bullying allegation. She believed that she was not afforded her rights and specifically talked about the lack of due process and natural justice in the decision to dismiss her. She said that her lawyer referred to the unfair dismissal that she was subjected to, and she believed that the chief executive was basically out to get her. Both of these cases highlight the importance of fairness in procedures, even if the alleged bully is guilty. From the

bullies' perspective they need to be able to believe they have been able to tell their side of the story, have had a fair hearing and have been treated respectfully throughout the process. Both the bullies cited above believed they had not had a fair hearing. The first transcript refers to being dismissed after a half hour meeting. Both of the participants above took their employer to court as they disputed the findings and the punishment afforded. While in the first case the court upheld the employer's decision to dismiss the participant, the employer may have saved both the financial and time costs involved in defending the organisation against the unfair dismissal case if the accused bully/harasser had been afforded a fair investigation with an outcome that was transparent. A number of participants in this study talked about taking their employer to court because of the *unfairness* of the investigation process and/or findings.

The way that the complaint was initiated was also considered unfair by a number of participants. As previously discussed, the majority of participants were surprised at the allegations against them and felt that the way that they first heard about the allegations was unfair. Around a third of the participants reported that they were not provided with examples of the behaviour they were alleged to have carried out and they were unable to respond to the specific allegations. For example, one participant was told that she was in breach of section 2 and 3 of the Equal Opportunity and Harassment Policy in her company. She said that at that time she did not know what behaviours were covered in section 2 and 3 of the Equal Opportunity and Harassment Policy and was not informed about the specific behaviours she was supposed to have carried out. Another participant received a letter from Safe Work SA accusing her of bullying, but the letter did not specify the

alleged behaviours. She only learned about the specific behaviours after receiving legal advice and her lawyer advocating on her behalf.

As described in the transcripts referred to, the perceptions of *unfairness* expressed by the majority of participants contributed to increased anger and other negative emotions. This sense of injustice and the ensuing anger contributed to legal action and other CWBs being taken against the organisation in a number of cases. It appeared from the transcripts that a majority of participants believed that the organisation did not follow the procedures set out in their workplace bullying complaint procedures, (poor *procedural justice*) and they did not trust the investigating officer and were not afforded respect (poor *interactional* and *interpersonal justice*). Many of those who were reprimanded following the investigation also believed that the outcome of the investigation and the disciplinary action that was handed down was unfair and outweighed the offense committed (poor *outcome justice*).

## **8.7 Theme 6: Repercussions**

### **8.7.1 Leaving the organisation**

The final theme that emerged from the transcripts was the *repercussions* of the bullying complaint in terms of loss of confidence and the negative impact on the career of the accused bullies. A quarter of the participants were either dismissed or reported they were forced to resign from their jobs as a result of the bullying allegations—one had been with the organisation for 15 years and was in a senior executive position. He had been found not guilty of bullying. Another left her job as a teacher after 22 years of service. One was summarily dismissed following



allegations of bullying and sexual harassment. Two were escorted from the workplace and told to stay home until after the allegations had been investigated. Despite one of these allegations not being substantiated, neither of these participants returned to the workplace, and one took his employer to court for wrongful dismissal and discrimination based on his sexuality (this was settled out of court) and the other was in the process of taking legal advice on her options. Two other participants decided to leave because they no longer trusted the organisation, because of lack of support during the investigation and ongoing rumours and gossip regarding their management abilities. A number of other participants talked about how they wanted to leave, but were unable to because of financial constraints or lack of available jobs to which to transfer.

Participants reported a number of difficulties returning to their roles as managers following the allegation of bullying made against them, whether they were found guilty or not guilty. Loss of confidence and trust was one reason why participants left their jobs as managers. For example, this participant reported the following:

I've now become a lot more suspicious, a lot less trusting of my staff, I was never the sort of person who kept records of conversations or meetings or times, and that caught me out during the investigation because [name of accused] did document meetings, times, actual words that were spoken in the meetings and when that was put to me, I had limited recollection or no recollection of it. Now,(sic) if I have a meeting with a staff member where I have to counsel them or I have to give them some bad feedback or criticism I'll make a record and make a note of what I've said and that's made me less trusting of my staff, and the other thing I've done which I never used to do before was I always believed that performance management was sort of like a

two-way street where you sit and talk about opportunities and have a general open discussion with people, I'm much more reserved now in what I say to people and how I give them feedback on work and as I said I keep records and documents of everything, keep every e-mail. I never used to do that.

(Middle Manager, private organisation)

As described in the transcript above, the participant reported being a lot less trusting of her staff following the allegation of workplace bullying and now makes notes and records of all performance-management sessions she has with staff. She reported being more reserved in her communications with subordinates and records and documents all interactions. She reported that this is different to how she used to interact with her subordinates prior to the allegation of bullying that was made against her. It appears that the experience of being accused of workplace bullying impacted on her ability to trust staff and the way she had previously interacted with her staff. This lack of confidence was expressed by participants who had been found guilty of bullying as well as those who were found not guilty of bullying.

All participants talked about a loss of reputation as a result of the allegations and believed their status as a good manager had been compromised. For example, the participant below talked about his behaviour being questioned even after he was found *not guilty* of sexual harassment and workplace bullying. He retired early and left the organisation because of the experience that he had gone through:

There's now this question mark about you. Your judgment is scrutinised and your value as a person is looked at with question mark. ... because there's rarely ever smoke without fire if you can say that, there's something there well now there's a question mark about how did you allow this to happen, the circumstance to come. So I felt as though there was a black mark now placed

against me in terms of just my role and my capacity as a senior manager in the organisation. (Senior Manager, multinational private company)

As described in the transcript above the participant reported that he felt as though there was a 'black mark' against his name. He suggested that most people believed that 'there is rarely any smoke without fire' and perceived that others would judge him by the allegation (i.e. the black mark) and not by the fact that he was found not guilty of the bullying and sexual harassment that he was accused of. He believed that the allegation had tarnished his role and capacity as a senior manager in a multinational organisation. He retired early from his position as a result of the allegation.

Others talked about how they wanted to leave their jobs, but were unable to because of financial constraints or lack of available employment to which they could transfer. The participant cited below retired early from her job as a senior teacher and now works as a shop assistant on a part-time basis:

I ended up leaving ... I was really annoyed, so [initially] I took long service leave, and I went back. I went back and I just thought I don't like it any more. I mean after that experience that really soured me. I thought I have just really lost my drive to do this job and to put in the hours and when something happens like that which I think really unfair, to be not supported. I just thought I'm not going to work like this for those people any more. This year I was fortunate to get a part-time position at the local pharmacy two days a week. My salary is reduced by around \$60,000 per annum. I do worry about this in the future because of the uncertain financial times at the moment, but I don't consider that I have made a bad move in leaving teaching. (Ex-teacher)

As illustrated in this transcript, the participant left her teaching position and now works as a shop assistant part time. Her decision to leave was linked with the sense of unfairness and anger regarding a lack of support during the bullying

investigation. She reported being ‘soured’ by the experience and of not wanting to work for people who had not supported her through the bullying allegations.

Another participant reported the following:

My relationship with my boss never ever repaired itself and last year I took long service leave because I felt I just needed to absolutely clear the air for myself ... and went back with a totally fresh approach to work and I lasted two weeks. It all came back. It was the same environment and I felt like I was the one that was being victimised [participant crying] and I resigned. And I have been out of the workforce now for nearly 12 months. (Middle Manager, public service)

Again, this excerpt of transcript describes a sense of unfairness and lack of support that contributed to the participant leaving the organisation. She reported returning to the ‘same environment’ and feeling victimised. It is interesting to note that when she was interviewed she had been away from the organisation for nearly 12 months, but was still displaying considerable distress when describing her experiences.

One participant was not in a position to retire or resign:

If I had a job tomorrow I would leave. At the moment I am the breadwinner in the family. It’s just not practical at the moment. I am looking for another job, but my husband is not working at the moment, and so I have to stay [crying]. (Middle Manager, private company)

The participant cited above reported looking for another job, but being unable to resign from her position as she was the main breadwinner in the family. Again, her distress was evident throughout the interview and she was having to mask this distress during the day at work.

Another participant who was receiving worker's compensation due to a workplace (psychological) injury as a result of the allegations of bullying against her, reported the following:

I can't go back, so yeah I've reached a point where I think if by April, May next year things haven't sorted themselves out then I'll just resign, I'll give it six more months or so but other than that I want out of it, I don't want to do this anymore. It's just dealing with the unjustness of all that, so that's how I feel with it. (Nurse Manager, public service)

Again, the transcript above illustrates the link between the participant's perception of injustice and the decision to leave the organisation. Many participants who left the organisation voluntarily reported leaving because of a high level of injustice and lack of trust with the organisation and because they believed their reputation had been tarnished by the allegations made against them.

### **8.7.2 Lack of debriefing**

Around a third of the participants complained about a lack of debriefing or follow-up following the investigation. Some reported being informed about the outcome of the investigation by phone, others by e-mail and others by letter. However, this group of participants felt that the issues that *they* wanted to address or the concerns that *they* had raised during the investigation process were not addressed at all. Rather, they were only informed of the results of the investigation (i.e. the complaint was substantiated or not substantiated) and informed of the subsequent actions that the organisation was going to take if they were found guilty of bullying. Some reported that the investigators alluded to problems with their communication style that may have contributed to the bullying allegation, or they were found guilty of discrete inappropriate behaviours, but not of bullying. However, these findings

were not expanded on and there was no opportunity for debriefing or further discussions.

For example, the participant cited below was cleared of all the allegations, but reported that the letter she received alluded that her communication style may have contributed to the complaint. However, there was no follow-up after she had received the letter and she was unsure what the specific concerns with her communication style were:

Anyway at the end of the day her report cleared me, but it still cast aspersions on me and my communication style, even though there had never been any discussion from her before about my communication style or any performance appraisals that I had had, it had never ever been raised as an issue. None of it. I thought that the report in one way cleared me but also left it pretty cloudy. (Middle Manager, private organisation)

The participant described the investigation report clearing her of the bullying allegations, but it was suggested that her communication style may have contributed to the complaint against her. However, she reported that this had never been raised as a concern before, and she was not sure how her behaviour or communication style may have contributed to the allegations, or how she could improve her communication style so it did not contribute to another bullying allegation. She said that while she was cleared of the allegations the report left the outcome pretty cloudy.

Other participants described being informed of the investigations results informally. For example, the participant cited below described receiving an informal phone call to let her know the outcome of the investigation. However, some months later, she had not yet received written notification of the outcome. From her

perspective, although the complaint against her was not substantiated, the issues that she had raised during the investigation were not addressed:

I have not received anything formal about the investigation. I've received a phone call from our ethical standards unit from one of the officers within the unit to say that a report is being finalised, no action is going to be taken against you so it wasn't even a you're in the clear and we apologise for putting you and your staff through this. I have received nothing in writing ... It still hasn't been resolved as far as I'm concerned and there has been no debriefing. There has been no debriefing to my staff. It's almost as if we all have to pretend that the whole process and the whole thing never happened and just forget about it. (Middle Manager, teaching institution)

The transcript above expresses the frustration felt by the participant following verbal notification that the complaint against her was not substantiated. From the participant's perspective the complaint is not fully resolved because there has been no debriefing or written formal notification that the allegations against her were not substantiated. She described receiving a phone call, but having had no written notification. She describes feeling as though the Ethical Standards Unit wants her and her staff to 'pretend that the whole process and the whole thing never happened', but that from her perspective, debriefing for both herself and her staff is an important part of the outcome.

In a similar way, another participant received written notification that the complaint against her was not substantiated. However, he reported that he was not given the opportunity to talk through any of his concerns raised in relation to the investigation process:

I got a letter, and that's it. I haven't talked to my manager or anyone else at work about the process because I think the process was ineffectual and

inappropriate for the complaint and a waste of resources and that's the process, and I am sure I am not the only one who has been subjected to it but the attitude is that ... the message is that this is the price of being a senior manager. (Senior Manager, public service)

Again, the participant above describes a lack of debriefing, which for him was an important part of the outcome. He wanted to be able to have the opportunity to discuss the problems that he experienced with the complaint process, but did not have the opportunity to do so. It is interesting to note that this participant describes the lack of feedback and debriefing as the 'price of being a senior manager'.

Another participant was called into a meeting and given the results of the investigation. However, unlike the participants cited above, and despite being able to discuss these results, she felt that she was still unable to get closure or to have her needs addressed:

No it [the complaint] wasn't substantiated. I was called into a meeting [in] which the General Manager, my Manager and the Acting Coordinator were in a room waiting for me and the GM of customer service basically said we are here today to advise you that the allegations were not supported and no disciplinary action will be taken. ... I was a bit angry that I had waited so long and it was just so impersonal and there was nothing in what they said. They may have just sent me an e-mail. There was nothing in what they said that helped me at all. It was so impersonal. ... all he said was the complaint wasn't proven and I felt like I needed to know why? I think when you are in this you need to know was there anything that I actually did that could have been done better ... what was in there ... what was ... I was just left empty. There was no closure at the end of it. (Middle Manager, private organisation)

As illustrated above, even when this participant met with the investigation team and was provided with the outcome of the investigation, an opportunity to discuss the findings, she felt that the feedback was 'impersonal' and not helpful. She



reported that some of the questions that she had about the allegations and her behaviour were not answered, and she needed to know why she had been accused of bullying. She said that following the meeting she was ‘just left empty’ with no closure at the end.

Together, these six major themes described the escalation of conflicts that took place in a stressful organisational environment and were shaped by the characteristics of the participant and of the complainant, to contribute to the bullying allegation. The different ways in which the participants were accused of bullying was also highlighted as was the different types of behaviours that were labelled bullying by complainants. It was interesting to note that while the participants were able to describe complainants that could be seen as provocative, none of them described predatory bullying behaviours, instead framing their behaviour within a conflict-escalation framework and framing themselves as victims. The disturbing impact of the bullying allegation and investigation in terms of injustice and negative health and career consequences was also reported by all participants. Many of the themes identified in the current study have been described in earlier research into workplace bullying. However, the results of the current study describe workplace bullying as perceived by the alleged perpetrators, something that is missing from previous research.

The next stage of the study is the quantitative stage, and results are presented next in chapter 9. The results of the qualitative and the quantitative stages of the study will be discussed together in Chapter 10.

## Chapter 9: Results of the Quantitative Stage of the Bullies' Study

### 9.1 Outcome of Complaint

As expected, most participants denied the bullying allegations that were made against them. According to the definition of bullying given, 90 per cent of participants reported that they had *never* bullied anyone, and ten per cent reported that they had bullied someone on a *rare occasion*. This can be contrasted with 26 per cent of participants being found guilty of workplace bullying.

As illustrated in Table 9.1, the majority of participants were found not guilty of workplace bullying (66.7 per cent) whereas a third of the sample was found guilty.

Table 9.1  
*Outcome of Bullying Allegations*

	Number (per cent)
Found guilty	8 (26.7)
Found not guilty	20 (66.7)
Unresolved/not investigated	1 (3.3)
Missing data	1 (3.3)

Despite most participants reporting that they had not bullied anyone, as illustrated in Table 9.2, all participants reported that they had carried out negative behaviours against subordinates. However, their responses on the NAQ-R (behaviours perpetrated towards others), indicated that the bullying behaviours (i.e. negative behaviours carried out on a weekly basis or more) were reported only rarely and the means of the NAQ-R total as well as of the subscales on *person-orientated*

and *work-orientated bullying* were well below the means reported for victims by Einarsen et al. (2009).

Table 9.2  
*Negative Behaviours Carried Out by Alleged Bullies*

NAQ-R Item	Never N (per cent)	Now and then N (per cent)	Monthly N (per cent)	Weekly N (per cent)	Daily N (per cent)
<b>I have withheld information that affected someone else's performance</b>	25 (83.3)	4 (13.3)	0	0	1 (3.3)
<b>I have ordered someone to do work below their level of competence</b>	20 (66.7)	10 (33.3)	0	0	0
<b>I have ignored someone's opinions and views</b>	23 (76.7)	6 (20)	1 (3.3)	0	0
<b>I have given tasks with unreasonable deadlines or impossible targets to someone</b>	27 (90)	2 (6.7)	1 (3.3)	0	0
<b>I have excessively monitored somebody's work</b>	15 (50)	9 (30)	3 (10)	1 (3.3)	2 (6.7)
<b>I have pressurised someone not to claim something that by right they are entitled to (e.g. sick leave, holiday entitlement, travel expenses)</b>	30 (100)	0	0	0	0
<b>I have exposed someone to an unmanageable workload</b>	24 (80)	4 (13.3)	2 (6.7)	0	0

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<b>I have humiliated or ridiculed another person in connection with their work</b>	27 (90)	2 (6.7)	0	0	0
<b>I have had key areas of responsibility removed or replaced with more trivial or unpleasant tasks</b>	17 (56.7)	9 (30)	3 (10)	1 (3.3)	0
<b>I have spread gossip or rumours about someone</b>	26 (86.7)	3 (10)	1 (3.3)	0	0
<b>I have ignored or excluded someone or sent someone to coventry</b>	23 (76.7)	6 (20)	0	0	1 (3.3)
<b>I have made insulting or offensive remarks about someone's person, attitudes or private life</b>	26 (86.7)	4 (13.3)	0	0	0
<b>I have given hints or signals that someone should leave their job</b>	27 (90)	3 (10)	0	0	0
<b>I have given repeated reminders of someone's errors or mistakes</b>	21 (70)	5 (16.7)	4 (13.3)	0	0
<b>I have ignored or given someone a hostile reaction when they have approached me</b>	26 86.7	4 (13.3)	0	0	0
<b>I have persistently criticised someone about their errors or mistakes</b>	23 (76.7)	4 (13.3)	2 (6.7)	1 (3.3)	0

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<b>I have played practical jokes on people I don't get along with</b>	29 (96.7)	1 (3.3)	0	0	0
<b>I have made allegations against someone</b>	20 (66.7)	7 (23.3)	3 (10)	0	0
<b>I have subjected someone to teasing and sarcasm</b>	30 (100)	0	0	0	0
<b>I have shouted at someone or targeted them with spontaneous anger</b>	25 (83.3)	5 (16.7)	0	0	0
<b>I have carried out behaviours such as finger pointing, invasion of personal space, shoving or blocking someone's way</b>	28 (93.3)	1 (3.3)	0	0	0
<b>I have made threats of violence or physical abuse, or actually abused someone</b>	29 (96.7)	1 (3.3)	0	0	0

No differences were found in the Total NAQ (*behaviours perpetrated towards others*) scores between those who had been found guilty ( $M = 28.25$ ,  $SD = 4.30$ ) and those found not guilty of bullying ( $M = 27.33$ ,  $SD = 5.04$ ),  $t(24) = 4.46$ ,  $p > .05$ ). This means that the bullies and the non-bullies both carried out a similar number of *negative acts* as reported on the NAQ-R *towards others*.

Similarly, no significant differences were found in the Total NAQ (*negative behaviours that alleged bullies were subjected to*) scores between those participants

who had been found guilty of bullying ( $M = 39.12$ ,  $SD = 17.20$ ) and those found not guilty of bullying ( $M = 37.00$ ,  $SD = 11.91$ ),  $t(24) = .36$ ,  $p > .05$ . This means that both the bullies and the non-bullies were exposed to a similar number of negative acts by others.

## **9.2 Victim or Perpetrator?**

As illustrated in Table 9.3, 66.8 per cent of participants reported that they had been bullied themselves over the previous 12 months, with 23.4 per cent reporting bullying at least on a monthly basis, if not more frequently. In line with this, Pearson's product-moment correlations between the total score of the NAQ-R (*negative behaviours that participants were subjected to*) and the *frequency of subjective bullying* participants reported was strong ( $r = .66$ ,  $p < .01$ ), suggesting that the greater the frequency of bullying, the greater the number of negative acts to which participants reported being exposed.

Table 9.3  
*Perceptions of Being a Victim Made by Participants*

<b>Have you been bullied at work over the last 12 months</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
No	10	33.3
Yes, bullied very rarely	8	26.7
Yes, bullied now and then	5	16.7
Yes, bullied several times a month	2	6.7
Yes, bullied several times a week	2	6.7
Yes, bullied almost daily	3	10.0

Similarly, the relationship between *frequency of bullying* and the *person-related bullying* was significant ( $r = .71, p < .01$ ), as was the relationship between *frequency of bullying* and the *physical intimidation* sub-factor of the NAQ-R ( $r = .52, p < .01$ ).

It was interesting to note that the relationship between the *work-related* sub-factor of the NAQ and the *perception of being a victim* of workplace bullying failed to reach statistical significance. This could suggest that the participants who identified as being bully victims were subjected to more personal attacks rather than work-related attacks. It may be that a manager's personal life is more easily targeted by subordinates than their managerial roles or work practices.

As illustrated in Figure 9.1, most participants reported being bullied by a subordinate (40 per cent,  $N = 12$ ), but others reported being bullied by their supervisors, or a combination of colleagues and subordinates, or subordinates and their supervisor.

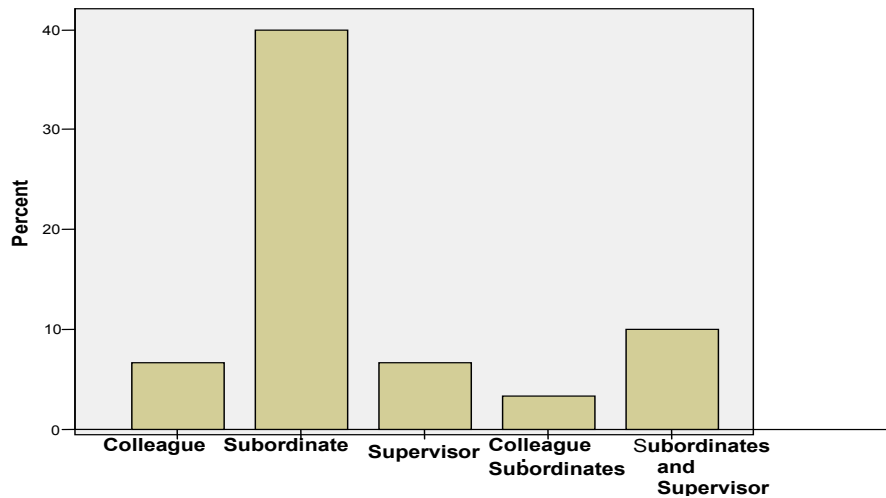


Figure 9.1. Hierarchical position of workplace bullying perpetrators who targeted participants.

### 9.3 Psychological Functioning

As illustrated in Table 9.4, many participants reported very high levels of *depression*, *anxiety* and *stress* up to two years following the bullying allegations being made against them. Their responses on the DASS indicated that 66.7 per cent of participants reported *depression* scores within the *moderate to severe* range of depressive symptoms. Similarly, 73.3 per cent of participants reported *anxiety* scores on the DASS within the *moderate to extremely severe* range of anxiety symptoms, and 56.6 per cent of participants had a *stress* score within the *moderate to extremely severe* range of stress.



Table 9.4  
*DASS Scores of Participants*

	Depression (n)	Anxiety (n)	Stress (n)
<b>Normal range</b>	26.7(n = 8)	23.3 (n = 7)	26.7 (n = 8)
<b>Mild range</b>	3.3 (n = 1)	0	16.7 (n = 5)
<b>Moderate range</b>	26.7 (n = 8)	46.7 (n = 14)	10.0 (n = 3)
<b>Severe range</b>	13.3 (n = 4)	13.3 (n = 4)	23.3 (n = 7)
<b>Extremely severe range</b>	26.7 (n = 4)	13.3 (n = 4)	23.3 (n = 7)

No overall differences were found in the DASS *depression* ( $M = 24$ ,  $SD = 14.84$ ), *anxiety* ( $M = 18$ ,  $SD = 12.96$ ) or *stress* scores ( $M = 27$ ,  $SD = 10.19$ ) of those participants who had been found guilty of bullying, compared to the *depression* scores ( $M = 17.7$ ,  $SD = 11.07$ ,  $p > .05$ ), *anxiety* scores ( $M = 10.42$ ,  $SD = 5.71$ ,  $p > .05$ ) and *stress* scores ( $M = 21.4$ ,  $SD = 9.9$ ,  $p > .05$ ) of those participants who had been found not guilty of bullying.

## 9.4 Perceptions of Justice

Table 9.5  
*Descriptive Statistics for Perceptions of Organisational Justice Scores*

Type of Justice	Mean	Standard Deviation
Procedural (n = 25)	15.2	6.8
Informational (n = 27)	12.1	5.8
Distributive (n = 27)	8.6	5.2
Interpersonal (27)	11.80	4.08

No significant differences were found in the *procedural justice* scores of those participants who had been found guilty of bullying ( $M = 12.6$ ,  $SD = 5.7$ ), and those who had been found not guilty of workplace bullying ( $M = 19.05$ ,  $SD = 8.05$ ,  $p > .05$ ).

No significant difference was found in the *interactional justice* scores of those participants who had been found guilty of bullying ( $M = 11.57$ ,  $SD = 3.15$ ) and those found not guilty of bullying ( $M = 15.57$ ,  $SD = 5.25$ ,  $p > .05$ ). However, a significant difference was found in the distributive justice scores of those participants who had been found guilty of bullying ( $M = 4.57$ ,  $SD = .97$ ) and those found not guilty of bullying ( $M = 12.36$ ,  $SD = 6.19$ ),  $t(20.2) = -5.31$ ,  $p < .01$ . This result is not surprising and suggests that those participants who were found not guilty of bullying perceived the outcome to be much fairer than those who were found guilty of bullying.

It was interesting to note that Pearson product-moment correlations found no significant relationships between the perceptions of *organisational fairness* (in terms of *distributive justice*, *procedural justice* and *interactional justice*) and participants' level of *anxiety*, *depression* and general *stress* as reported on the DASS.

## **Chapter 10: Discussion and Overall Conclusions from the Bullies'**

### **Study**

This study examined the development of workplace bullying allegations and the consequences of those allegations, through information gained from the alleged perpetrator. By examining the experience of these accused bullies through a mixed-methods approach, empirical data added to the findings of the qualitative stage of the study. To the knowledge of the writer, the detailed focus on the accused perpetrator's perspective on bullying is a new approach in bullying research, as the alleged perpetrator's point of view into the background of the allegations and the allegations themselves have not been examined in previous bullying research. Additionally, the impact of being accused of workplace bullying has not been examined in previous research. This chapter aims to discuss the results of the qualitative and quantitative aspects of this study and provides recommendations for future research in this important area of enquiry.

While all participants of the study were accused of being bullies, only 27 per cent of participants were found guilty. Others were cleared of the bullying accusation, and some reprimanded for discrete inappropriate behaviours. Given these results, it was not surprising that only a minority, ten per cent, admitted to having occasionally bullied someone. This result was reflected in the responses to the NAQ-R scales, where participants found guilty of bullying did not differ significantly in the number of negative acts they carried out against others, from those not found guilty. Several explanations are possible. First of all, it is of little surprise that the sample admitted to so little bullying and that most participants

reported carrying out only a few negative acts, as bullying is a socially unacceptable behaviour. In line with this, one of the participants equated being called a bully with being a monster. Therefore, labelling oneself as a bully may be unacceptable, both with regard to impression management, that is, presenting yourself in a positive light, and also in regard to self-esteem protection and enhancement, that is, maintaining a positive picture of oneself (Baumeister, Boden & Smart, 1996). Within this perspective, a person who wants to provide a good impression to others, including the researcher, would not admit being a bully, but would justify their negative behaviours as necessary and within the context of the current study, part of their job as a good manager. In order to protect their own self-esteem and continue to present themselves in a positive light, bullies are likely to make light of their transgressions and place blame on the other for being sensitive or misinterpreting reasonable managerial actions or direction. Baumister and colleagues (1996) suggest that individuals with high, but unstable self-esteems, or an inflated view of themselves, are more likely to become aggressive when favourable views about themselves are threatened. In particular, they argue that individuals with high but unstable self-esteems will aggress against the source of their threat and will be able to justify their behaviour as rational and normal (Baumister et al., 1996).

From within this perspective, the finding that 90 per cent of participants denied bullying anyone, and only ten per cent of the participants reported bullying others (on a rare occasion) could be expected, even though all participants reported carrying out negative behaviours towards others and were accused of bullying. It is expected that individuals responsible for severe bullying would likely not take part in a study such as this, nor admit their transgressions.

This study was, to the best of our knowledge, one of the first to adapt the NAQ-R from the passive (e.g. *having my work excessively monitored*) to the active (e.g. *excessively monitored somebody's work*) in order to include the perpetrators' report of workplace bullying (see also De Cuyper et al., 2009). The number and frequency of negative acts carried out by the alleged bullies on the NAQ-R did not differ between those found not guilty of bullying and those found guilty of workplace bullying. This finding reinforces the subjective nature of workplace bullying, because a negative act in one environment may be considered normal, or may be attributed to the environment or situation (as opposed to the perpetrator), while in another context may be considered part of bullying activity. In support of this, many of the participants justified carrying out items on the NAQ-R as normal parts of their managerial duties and did not regard them as automatically negative.

The subjective nature of behaviours brings into question the validity of questionnaires such as the NAQ-R to measure bullying, particularly from the perspective of the accused bully. Participants in the study reported that a number of the items on the NAQ-R such as *exposing someone to an unmanageable workload*, *finding fault with someone's work*, *excessively monitored somebody's work*, *ignored someone's opinions and views* and *removed key areas of responsibility for a staff member* as unpopular actions that a manager may have to make from time to time as part of their job. From a subordinate's perspective such action may be objectionable, appear unwarranted and be considered bullying. However, from the alleged perpetrator's perspective it is may be a reasonable managerial directive, if not unpopular. To differentiate between unpopular (but reasonable) management acts and bullying behaviours, it may be helpful to ask questionnaire respondents to assess

the ‘reasonableness’ of the behaviours on the questionnaire, prior to asking them if they have carried out the behaviour (or, in that regard, if they have been exposed to the behaviour). For example, I have *unreasonably* been asked to work below my level of competence or I have *unreasonably* asked someone to work below their level of competence. Given that there is only one other study that we are aware of where the NAQ has been administered to bully perpetrators (see De Cuyper et.al, 2009), it seems logical that a questionnaire originally designed for bully targets may have to be modified slightly in this way in order to capture behaviours that the perpetrator recognises as workplace bullying, as opposed to reasonable managerial actions.

### **10.1 Workplace Climate and Culture**

As expected, the results of the current study found that participants reported a working environment that was fraught with conflict, role ambiguity and inappropriate behaviours. Participants described industrial issues such as staffing shortages, lack of clear roles, poor performance from subordinates and team cultures where inappropriate behaviours were considered normal. They also described management styles that supported inappropriate social climates. These findings were not unexpected and support earlier research on the organisational antecedents to bullying (Hoel & Salin, 2003; Salin, 2003; Vartia, 1996b; Zapf, 1999; Zapf et al., 1996). However, what is new is that the organisational environments described in this study were reported by the alleged bullies, and not by the targets or third-party witnesses, which has been the case in previous research. It is also interesting that most of the participants in the study justified their behaviour in relation to the environment (something they said they had no control over), or the complainant’s behaviour, and appeared to have little insight into how inappropriate their behaviour

was, or the impact that their behaviours had on the complainant. These findings point towards an attributional explanation of workplace bullying. It seems reasonable to infer that because these alleged bullies denied personal responsibility for their behaviours and blamed external sources such as the organisational environment, or the complainant's behaviour, it is not unexpected that they perceived the negative feedback about their own behaviours as unfair and believed that they were the victims.

Results of the qualitative analysis also showed that some of the bullying allegations were about isolated negative interactions within the work environment, as well as organisational issues such as unpopular policies, management decisions, unsupportive behaviours, conflicts over job classification and failure of management to consult adequately, as opposed to repeated personalised attacks. This finding supports research that has found that some employees who are subjected to one-off or negative behaviours at work may frame these behaviours as bullying and supports other studies that suggest that employee accounts do not necessarily fit a clear definition of bullying (Liefoghe & Mackenzie-Davey, 2003; Liefoghe & Mackenzie-Davey, 2010). Making an allegation of bullying may be one of the few ways in which staff can express unhappiness and ongoing frustrations with management decisions and behaviours in an environment where they feel they are not heard any other way.



## 10.2 Characteristics of the Complainant and the Perpetrator

### 10.2.1 Who are the victims and who are the perpetrators?

While all participants had been accused of being a *perpetrator* of bullying, over half of the alleged bullies also reported being a *victim* of workplace bullying. Data from the quantitative part of the study indicated that all participants reported having been exposed to at least one negative act, usually by a subordinate, on a weekly or daily basis in the previous two years. Over 60 per cent of participants reported being bullied according to a specific definition of workplace bullying, and yet using an operational definition, *all* participants reported being exposed to negative acts on a weekly or daily basis. Therefore, not all negative acts were interpreted as bullying. Despite a number of participants describing long-standing inappropriate behaviours directed at them by subordinates, they did not label the behaviour as bullying until the accusation of bullying was made against them. This result is similar to that found in other studies (Einarsen et al., 2003; Hoel et al., 1999; Salin, 2001; Zapf et al., 2003), where classifying bullying using different criteria resulted in different incidence rates. However, it might also suggest that managers are reluctant to label inappropriate behaviours as bullying.

This highlights the subjective nature of bullying discussed earlier, where negative acts in one environment might be considered reasonable, and the same acts in a different context may be interpreted in a negative light. Furthermore, it highlights the sometimes nebulous boundary between victim and perpetrator (Tehrani, 2003). Many participants described negative acts carried out towards them by subordinates that included swearing, spitting, yelling and intimidating behaviours. However, the participants who reported being targeted by these behaviours did not

initially frame them as bullying, but believed they were attempting to manage poor behaviours of subordinates and that it was their job to manage the situation. The act of submitting a bullying complaint was viewed by these managers as an escalation of the subordinate's inappropriate and hostile behaviours towards them, and often, despite the history of escalating conflict, it was the first time that the participant had believed they were the victim of bullying themselves.

There is some evidence that bully targets sometimes hesitate to label themselves as victims, because being a victim implies being unable to solve problems in one's working life and not being accepted among colleagues and superiors (Zapf & Einarsen, 2003). This may be especially true for managers who feel they are expected to deal with the poor behaviours of subordinates. Therefore, it is not surprising that many participants who were subjected to negative behaviours by their subordinates did not label themselves as victims until after the complaint of bullying was made against them. It may be perceived as a career-limiting move for a manager to make a complaint about bullying, thus labelling themselves as a victim, and it may be perceived that they are not coping as a manager or they are unable to perform their managerial responsibilities competently. This may be a reason why *upward bullying* (bullying from subordinates to managers) is not reported as frequently as bullying by managers towards subordinates (Rayner & Cooper, 2003; Branch et al., 2007). As studies have found that the primary perpetrators of bullying are managers (Rayner & Cooper, 2003), it is reasonable that the focus of bullying research and interventions has been on managers as perpetrators. However, it is also important to understand and investigate *all* forms of workplace bullying and recognise that managers may not complain or claim they are being bullied as readily

as employees. This has implications for both policy and workplace bullying prevention strategies, in that a policy that recognises upwards bullying, and interventions and training that assists managers who are being bullied by their staff may be important to consider. Future research and intervention strategies need to acknowledge the existence of upward bullying as an important organisational issue that warrants further attention.

### **10.2.2 The accused bullies**

As we expected, the accused bullies justified their behaviour and had little insight that their behaviour or management style may have been bullying, or if not bullying, at the very least, inappropriate. To the accused bullies, their behaviour was rational, purposeful and appropriate. Humour was justified as being used appropriately, even though the targets complained about the inappropriate use of humour. A number of the participants promoted a social or organisational culture in which sexist and inappropriate behaviours were the norm and where humour was used inappropriately, but appeared to have little insight that their behaviour was out of place, minimising the impact of their actions and blaming the victim for being over-sensitive. This study is the first study known to the author where the bully perpetrators themselves have described and justified their behaviours. The interview data suggested that *both* the bullies (i.e. those participants who had the bullying complaint against them substantiated), and those participants who were found of *not* guilty of bullying, but guilty of lesser indiscretions or discrete behaviours, appeared to either normalise their behaviour as reasonable management direction, or while acknowledging their behaviour was inappropriate, attributed it to factors outside of

their control. These factors included work stress, poor staffing levels, blurred roles and boundaries, under-performing subordinates or upwards bullying.

### **10.2.3 The complainants' behaviour**

Performance issues and negative behaviours perpetrated by the complainant were a major source of the conflict between the complainants and many accused bullies in the current study. A number of the accused bullies justified their own behaviour as a response to the problematic behaviour of the victim/complainant. While one would expect bully perpetrators to justify their behaviour, the behaviour of victims is a potential cause of bullying, and from a conflict escalation perspective could be interpreted as aggressive towards the other party at times. Results from the complainants study in this thesis suggested that at times complainants behaviours can be provocative, with other studies also suggesting that bully victims themselves view some of their own their behaviours as potential causes of the bullying that they were exposed to, in particular, problems with their work performance (Zapf,1999). From this perspective, it is interesting to note that poor performance was cited as one of the main issues contributing to the allegations of bullying being made against the participants in this study. Furthermore, there has been some recent research that has suggested that the individual differences in subordinates' attribution styles may account for their perceptions of bullying (Martinko et. al., 2009).

Complainants' inappropriate behaviours can also be seen as reactions to inappropriate behaviours of the participant, or negative reactions to unpopular organisational policies, practices and management decisions. Taking into account the negative behaviours of both parties in the dispute supports the conflict-escalation model of bullying, where both perpetrator and victim contribute to the escalation of

the bullying (Zapf & Gross, 2001), as well as studies that have shown that hostile acts in the workplace are likely to be met with counter-aggression from targets (Aquino, Tripp & Bies, 2001; Lee & Brothbridge, 2006; Skarlicki & Folger, 1997; Zapf & Gross, 2001). It is not surprising, therefore, that perpetrators in the current study were able to justify their actions by focusing on the complainant's negative behaviour, as this may well have been inappropriate at times. As both parties are involved in the escalation of the conflict, and both behave inappropriately at times, it may be that the person who files the complaint is labelled the 'complainant' or 'target' of 'victim' and the one who has the allegations made against them is labelled the 'bully'. However, both parties may have, at some stage during the conflict escalation, bullied the other, and based on her clinical work with both bully targets and perpetrators, Tehrani (2003) highlights the often blurred boundaries between victim and perpetrator. Given the reluctance of managers to identify themselves as victims, as discussed earlier, it is more probable that subordinates are likely to file complaints of bullying before the manager in which they are in conflict with does.

### **10.3 Perceptions of Organisational Injustice**

Perceptions of *injustice* were a major theme running thorough the interviews with the accused bullies. Many of the alleged perpetrators reported feeling disempowered by the complaint process and reported that the procedures were either not followed, or were not followed correctly. Results of the specific hypotheses indicated no difference in the perceptions of *procedural justice* and *interactional justice* between those participants who were found guilty of bullying and those found not guilty of bullying. While these results need to be interpreted with caution given the small sample size, when examined in relation to the qualitative data, most

participants, whether they were found guilty or not, reported significant concerns with the way the investigation was managed. As a result, several participants had taken or were in the process of taking legal action against their employer as a result of either a perception of unfair termination, or because they believed they sustained a workplace psychological injury as a result of the allegations and investigation process and were seeking compensation. These findings support research that suggests that anger and poor perceptions of justice contribute to legal claiming by employees (Goldman, 2003; Lind et al., 2000a) following employment termination and supports Australian studies that suggest that perceptions of unfairness at work can contribute to workers making compensation injury claims against their employer (Winefield et al., 2010). It follows that it is particularly important for organisations to treat *all* respondents in a fair and just manner and provide appropriate support and counselling during investigations, even if complaint respondents have been accused of heinous behaviours.

#### **10.4 Impact on Psychological and Physical Health**

Results indicated that participants reported significant health consequences as a result of being accused of workplace bullying. Most participants reported scores on the DASS within the *moderate* to *severe* range of symptoms for both *depression* and *anxiety*. These scores are clinically relevant, especially when the interview data is taken into account. Participants described psychological conditions such as anxiety disorders, major depression and PTSD. Some participants described suicidal ideation. All participants saw themselves as victims and most described their work environment as being hostile. Many reported supports at work had been withdrawn and that their career, reputation and role were being threatened as a result of the

allegations made against them. These findings support earlier research that has found that exposure to systematic and prolonged aggressive workplace behaviour has severe health consequences (Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2003; Einarsen & Raknes, 1997; Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2004; Zapf et al., 1996) and again makes the demarcation between perpetrator and victim murky at times. However, no previous studies have examined the psychological consequences of being labelled a bully and the consequences of being investigated for workplace bullying. Again, these results suggest that alleged perpetrators require significant support through any investigation process, just as bully victims require support.

Over half the participants in this study took sick leave as a result of the negative health effects that they were experiencing, and at the time of the interviews, three participants were either on or were in the process of applying for worker's compensation as a result of obtaining a workplace (psychological) injury. One had been on worker's compensation for 10 months as a result of a psychological injury sustained through the bullying accusation. The economic cost of psychological injury claims is significantly higher than physical injury claims, and it takes more than double the time to return the worker to the workplace if they have sustained a psychological injury (Australian Occupational Health and Safety Compensation Council, 2007). Therefore, from an economic perspective it is important to pay attention to the health of both the victim and the alleged perpetrator during a bullying investigation.

Results indicated significant negative career consequences for the accused perpetrators, irrespective of whether they had been found guilty of the bullying allegation. Twenty-five per cent of participants left their organisation as a result of

the allegations made against them, even if they were found not guilty of bullying. This finding supports other studies where exit from the organisation is the final stage in workplace bullying (Zapf & Gross, 2001). However, whereas other studies focus on the victim leaving the organisation, the current study draws attention to the perpetrator at times being forced to leave whether found guilty or not. Those that stayed with the organisation reported loss of confidence in their abilities as managers. Many described concern about their reputation following the investigations even when the complaint against them was not substantiated. None of the participants received any formal debriefing following the investigation, or was offered coaching or support. Loss of confidence was a major repercussion of the allegations and some left their managerial positions because of this, despite being found not guilty of the allegations. Given the poor mental health symptoms they were describing, this loss of confidence is not surprising. However, given that a number of participants masked their distress and regulated their emotions and behaviour, it is not surprising that the need for support, coaching and perhaps mentoring during and following a bullying investigation may not have been recognised.

Although results cannot be generalised to the wider population, this study is the first to have examined the perceptions of accused bullies following an investigation into their behaviour. These results suggest that some organisations need to acknowledge the existence of upward bullying as a potential problem that warrants attention. Results also challenge the populist view of all bullies as being unfeeling and insensitive and psychopathic in character. Results suggest that many respondents to bullying complaints, including those who are guilty of bullying, may hide or



regulate severe emotional distress. Managers who have been accused of workplace bullying require support, education about their behaviours and mentoring, whether they have been found guilty of bullying or not. If managers are not functioning effectively because of the negative impact of a workplace bullying complaint, it is reasonable to expect that this impact will not be confined to them alone, but will also affect the workgroup itself and ultimately the organisation. As a person's perception of fairness has a significant impact on the decision whether to submit a workplace injury compensation claim (Dollard et al., 1999; Winefield et al., 2010) or take legal action against an employer (Lind et al., 2000), ensuring that the accused bully is accorded a just and fair investigation is paramount.

There are some inherent methodological limitations to an exploratory study of this nature. As all data were obtained through interviews with managers accused of workplace bullying, a socially desirable response bias is expected. It is reasonable to presume that these participants will have expressed themselves in a positive light and will have viewed themselves as victims as opposed to perpetrators. However, because generalisability is not the main objective of this study, the convenience sampling and the small number of participants are justifiable. One of the limitations of the current study is that no inter-rater reliability cross checks of the coding were performed by another researcher for the qualitative aspect of this study, and therefore it is possible the emergent codes may have been interpreted in a different manner or labelled another way by a different analyst. Despite the methodological limitations of an exploratory study such as this, it is one of the first in-depth studies of bullying that has been undertaken through the perspective of the accused bullies. Further, the results are not necessarily at odds with the findings of the dominant paradigm in

bullying research and of research into consequences of perceptions of injustice at work. Further research examining bullying from the perspective of the accused is recommended in order to broaden the scope of workplace bullying research and to take into account the voice of all the participants involved in workplace bullying.

## **Chapter 11: Examining Bullying Complaints from an HR**

### **Perspective: Study 3**

#### **11.1 Introduction**

The first two studies in this thesis examined the workplace bullying complaints from both the complainants' perspective, and from the alleged perpetrators' perspective. These studies have highlighted that the way in which a complaint is managed by the organisation has the potential to impact negatively on both the complainant and the perpetrator alike. The aim of this third study is to examine the complaint process from the perspective of the HR consultant, who is tasked with both preventing and intervening in complaints of workplace bullying.

#### **11.2 Addressing Bullying in an Organisational Context**

Measures taken to counteract workplace bullying begin with organisations' legal obligations to create and maintain a safe environment for employees. There have been a number of recommendations in both the literature (see Fox & Stallworth, 2009; Richards & Daley, 2003), from trade unions (see UNISON, 2003), and in Australia, a number of government departments, as to how to prevent workplace bullying, and how to address complaints of bullying. The responsibility for implementing these recommendations is usually charged to HR personnel who play a key role in designing and putting into practice organisational anti-bullying policies and complaint procedures. However, little research has been conducted on the challenges faced by HR personnel in implementing policy (Salin, 2008), or where

they place their emphasis in addressing workplace bullying complaints within the framework of their policies and procedures.

The prominence of bullying as an occupational health and safety issue (Caponecchia & Wyatt, 2007; Elshaug, Knott & Mellington, 2004; Mayhew & McCarthy, 2005; Spurgeon, 2003) draws attention to organisational risk factors that contribute to bullying and that have been outlined earlier in this thesis. In recognition of this, bullying is now part of the South Australian occupational health and safety legislation and as such, employers are charged with a legal responsibility to take reasonable steps to both prevent bullying and manage complaints of workplace bullying fairly and promptly. The South Australian Interagency Round Table on Workplace Bullying Guide for Employers (2005) recommends the following:

Bullying should be managed like any other occupational health and safety hazard. That is, once identified, the degree of risk should be assessed and the risk controlled and reviewed to ensure that workplace bullying does not become, or continue to be, a problem in the workplace. (p. 5)

One of the first steps in this risk-management approach to workplace bullying is to bring about a zero-tolerance culture to bullying through the development of workplace bullying policy and complaint procedure (Ferris, 2009; Richards & Daley, 2003; UNISON, 2003). Within this context, the organisation's commitment to a bullying free workplace is made clear. While an integrated approach to workplace bullying that encompasses policy, procedure and practice is recommended (Fox & Stallworth, 2009), Richards and Daley (2003) suggest that a bullying policy should be a standalone document and separated from other harassment or conflict-related policies and complaint procedures. They recommend that the bullying policy and complaint procedure define what bullying is, and what it is not, in order that all staff,

regardless of their position, understands the framework of the policy. They argue that without a policy that legitimises workplace bullying complaints, it is difficult for staff to raise issues about bullying (Richards & Daley, 2003). In South Australia, there are a number of examples of workplace bullying and harassment policies and guides available to assist organisations to develop their own policy and bullying and harassment complaint resolution processes (see South Australian Interagency Round Table on Workplace Bullying, A Practical Guide for Employers, 2005; South Australian Equal Opportunity Commission, Handbook for Employers in South Australia, 2010 for examples).

As well as having a policy to address bullying, it is equally important that both employees and leaders in the organisation receive adequate training concerning their roles and responsibilities in relation to the policy and complaint procedures (Ferris, 2009; Fox & Stallworth, 2009; Richards & Daley, 2003). Fox and Stallworth (2009) highlight the importance of training being tailored to the specific needs of the organisation and the importance of training employment professionals to whom bullied targets turn to for assistance. As poor leadership and management styles have been found to contribute to bullying (see Hoel & Salin, 2003 and Zapf et al., 2003 for a review of these studies) , Salin (2008) emphasises the importance of training that increases leader competence in dealing with bullying. This is especially important given the role that supervisors and managers often play as being the first access point in most integrated conflict-management systems.

However, while there are a number of recommendations on how to prevent and manage workplace bullying, there has been little research that has examined how bullying is actually addressed by HR professionals, where they place their emphasis in

the application of workplace bullying complaint procedures and where they see the gaps and challenges in current policy. Furthermore, the possible tension between HR practitioners tasked with supporting managers in their role, supporting employees who complain about unfair or inappropriate practices, as well as protecting the organisation from litigation, has not been examined in previous research to our knowledge.

Contributing to this tension, most bullying policies and complaint procedures charge the line managers with the responsibility of intervening in ‘informal’ complaints of bullying in the first instance. Given that managers are more likely to be the bullies (Zapf et al., 2003), this can potentially contribute to complaints being minimised or being framed as conflicts or performance issues by managers. In an integrated conflict-management system, when HR professionals are approached by bully complainants that have not succeeded in having their complaint resolved through discussion with their manager, they too may unconsciously take the side of the manager, who as someone in a more senior position than the complainant (and who may even be in a more senior position than the HR consultant), has greater power and influence. The way that HR consultants then view the bullying allegation has the potential to escalate the matter when a complainant feels they are not having their allegation of bullying addressed in a fair manner. Marshall (2005) found that in her study of sexual harassment complaints, managers often reframed the complaint as management lapses, or personality conflicts rather than sexual harassment, therefore deflecting the issue away from a legal rights-based issue, towards a performance-management problem or personality problem. She suggested that because of these management practices, employees were reluctant to pursue

complaints and were ambivalent about the policies and the personnel who administer them. Her findings regarding concerns about reporting sexual harassment complaints were very similar to those of the 2004 Workforce Perspective Survey undertaken within the South Australian public service in relation to workplace bullying, where the most common reason for not lodging a complaint was that respondents were not confident any good would come out of it, and only 19 per cent of respondents agreed that the complaint process was *not* intimidating or threatening (South Australian Office of Public Employment, 2004).

Cunningham and Hyman (1999) draw attention to the problem that also exists when managers are aware of the procedures to follow in policies, but have had inadequate training and are ill equipped in implementing policies and specialised roles that were traditionally carried out by HR personnel, or trained conflict-resolution practitioners. A lack of appropriate conflict-resolution training by managers could contribute to bullying being worsened through inappropriate interventions and managers not recognising that the conflicts they are presented with are, in actual fact, bullying. When complaints are elevated to HR for assistance, HR personnel may inadvertently take the perspective of managers and focus on the complainant's retaliatory behaviours, again supporting the perpetrator's perspective.

While most organisations in Australia have bullying complaint policies and procedures in place because of the legal requirement to do so, a number of authors have highlighted how HR departments have a propensity to focus on the target-perpetrator dyad and undervalue the importance of assessing and addressing more systemic issues that contribute to the bullying (Caponecchia & Wyatt, 2007; Elshaug et al., 2004; Salin, 2009). This focus on individual complaints has the potential to

prevent bullying from being addressed in a proactive and systemic manner throughout the organisation and prevents the recommended OHSW risk-management approach being applied. Indeed, studies examining the organisation's response to bullying have suggested that they are often centred on developing a policy and are focused on the perpetrator–target dyad, with little or no emphasis being placed on more pre-emptive systemic measures to address the causes (Caponecchia & Wyatt, 2007; Salin, 2008, 2009).

Most authors recommend that organisations take an integrative conflict-management approach to addressing complaints of workplace bullying (Fox & Stallworth, 2009, Richards & Daley, 2003) and other workplace conflicts (Costantino & Merchant, 1996) and that alternative dispute-resolution (ADR) processes be built into complaint-handling options as an early preference. This means that complainants have a number of access points into the complaint system and can opt to have their complaint resolved through mediation as an ADR process in the first instance, or make use of more formal processes within the system such as arbitration or investigation of a formal complaint. In Australia, employees also have the option of making a bullying, discrimination or sexual harassment complaint directly to the state or federal regulatory agency. This right is usually made explicit in organisations' bullying and harassment policies, despite this being viewed as counterproductive to the best interests of the organisation.

Despite complaint systems offering a number of integrated access points, Salin (2009) found that the most common measures taken to address the complaints of bullying were restorative measures rather than punitive, and that when they became involved in complaints of bullying, HR departments were reluctant to use



more formal methods of dealing with the complaint or to discipline the perpetrator (Salin, 2009). Rather, HR practitioners were much more likely to use the ADR processes and address bullying as they would workplace conflict. While this could be applauded as utilising the ADR process in the first instance, it may support the premise that bullying is not addressed systemically in organisations and that HR practitioners generally view bullying complaints as conflicts and are reluctant to name aggressive management styles as bullying, or take disciplinary action against bully perpetrators.

In line with these findings and based on her clinical experience, Ferris (2004) described a typology of organisational responses to bullying complaints. She said that organisations usually respond in three ways: the first is by accepting negative behaviours, which she called a *see no evil* approach. The organisations may or may not have a bullying policy, but tend to ignore bad behaviours and deny any culture of bullying. The second was having policies and complaint procedures that emphasise dignity and respect, but treating bullying as ‘personality clashes’ and conflicts and therefore not properly addressing bullying in a systemic way (*hear no evil*). This can happen when HR delegates some of their functions to managers and see their primary role as supporting managers to carry out these functions. According to Ferris (2004), they are therefore more likely to take on the manager’s perception of bullying complaints as opposed to the complainant’s. The third approach described by Ferris (2004) was where an organisation took active measures to prevent and stop any bullying or harassing behaviours, including the organisation providing training to all employees to increase general awareness about workplace bullying. She called this approach *do no evil*.

The observations of Ferris (2004) fit with the early findings of Leymann (1996), who argued that bullying has the potential to develop into what he termed *organisational bullying* when a complaint is made and it becomes ‘official’ within the organisation. This is due to an attribution bias that places responsibility for the bullying behaviour on the target’s personal characteristics rather than on the organisational environment that may have allowed the bullying to occur in the first place (Leymann, 1996). A number of studies have also suggested that reporting workplace bullying and submitting a formal complaint can make the situation worse (Rayner, 1998), because management and HR personnel tend to support the bully, who is often part of the management team (Namie & Namie, 2000).

Fox and Stallworth (2009) highlight that there is a need to better examine bullying through employment professionals such as HR consultants and argue that bullying research needs to move away from the focus on bullies and targets. This supports suggestions offered by Liefoghe and Davey (2003), who emphasise the importance of listening to a *range* of voices when explaining workplace bullying so that the voices of those who are usually silent can become part of the bullying debate.

With this in mind, study 3 aimed to investigate the perceptions of HR personnel about workplace bullying complaints and current policies and procedures that they utilise to address bullying. In particular, this study aims to uncover some of the tensions experienced by HR personnel in addressing workplace bullying complaints and in implementing a systemic approach to preventing and managing workplace bullying that takes into account the antecedents to bullying identified in bullying research.

### **11.3 Aims of Study 3**

This study utilised focus groups to examine the strengths and weakness of anti-bullying policies and complaint mechanisms from the perception of HR personnel. The central research questions in the current study are:

1. What bullying behaviours are reported by complainants as bullying and how are these allegations of bullying typically addressed?
2. How is workplace bullying addressed from a systemic perspective and what features are prioritised by HR personnel?
3. What do HR personnel see as the strengths and weaknesses of their organisation's bullying and harassment complaint procedures and policies?

### **11.4 Why Utilise a Focus Group?**

In contrast to individual interviews or surveys, focus groups capitalise on the interaction within the group in order to allow participants who share common experiences to relate their knowledge and points of view (Kitzinger, 2006). The discussion and debate among a group of peers can bring to light inconsistencies, ambivalence or draw attention to a shared understanding that individual interviews may fail to elicit. The current study utilised focus groups because it was thought that shared issues in addressing workplace bullying that HR personnel hold would be elicited in a group context more readily than through individual interviews.

While traditionally focus groups have been used for preliminary research in larger research projects, they have also been used as a follow-up research tool to clarify findings (Morgan, 1988). Focus-group methods have become more popular in social-science evaluation research as a method of exploring the interpretation of

research results (Carey, 1994; Kidd & Parshall, 2000) and as a tool for policy analysis (Kahan, 2001; Parker & Tritter, 2006). The current focus-group study aims to utilise the methodological and analytical approach to focus-group data collection suggested by Barbour (2007, 2008) to address some of the findings in the earlier studies in this thesis with the focus-group participants. In particular, this study aimed to find out what bullying behaviours were being reported by complainants and how these allegations of bullying were addressed. We were also interested in examining how HR practitioners addressed the antecedents of workplace bullying and where they placed their emphasis in preventing and managing workplace bullying from the occupational health and safety perspective described earlier in this thesis.

## **Chapter 12: Method for Study 3**

### **12.1 Participants**

Invitations were sent to the director of a government agency that manages workplace bullying, harassment and discrimination complaints, HR directors at five government departments, the HR manager of an independent school and HR managers in five private organisations that were known by the researcher. HR consultants at these organisations were invited to attend focus groups that had been planned for particular days and times. They were also invited to bring other HR practitioners with experience in workplace bullying who might be interested in attending a focus group on the subject.

Three government departments accepted the invitation, and two of them requested that focus groups be held at their organisation, at a time that was convenient for them. The third government department offered to hold a focus group consisting of participants from a number of organisations at their premises. One independent school accepted the invitation and organised three other HR personnel from other schools to attend the session. Two HR practitioners from the private organisations participated.

In total, four focus groups were held. The first was made up of 13 HR personnel from a government health service. The focus group was held at the organisation's central office and the participants attended from a number of metropolitan sites. This group is referred to as the Health Services Focus Group. Participants were 11 women and 2 men.

The second focus group consisted of five HR personnel from four independent (non-government) schools. This group was held at one of the participating schools. This was referred to as the School Focus Group. There were three women and two men present at this group.

Four HR staff attended the third focus group. These were all senior HR staff from the one government department and the focus group was held in the HR meeting room. This group is referred to as the Government Focus Group. There were three women and one man.

The fourth group was held in the offices of the South Australian Equal Opportunity Commission and was attended by two complaint-handling staff with experience in HR management and bullying and harassment complaint handling and three HR practitioners, one from an interstate government agency and two from private industry. This group is referred to as the Mixed Focus Group. There were four women and one man participating.

## **12.2 Survey Materials**

All focus-group participants were asked to complete a brief survey. The survey asked participants their workplace title and whether their organisation was situated in the private sector, public service, educational sector or local-government sector. It asked a question specifically about training and qualifications in areas applicable to bullying; in particular, what training participants had in conflict management, mediation and investigation of workplace bullying complaints.

### **12.3 Transcribing the Focus-Group Discussions**

All the focus-group discussions were audio recorded. However, because the Health Focus Group was made up of 13 participants, audio recording of the discussion was difficult because of the spread of people throughout the large room. Therefore, this group was broken into four smaller groups and each group was provided with a particular aspect of the broader topic to discuss. For example, one group was asked to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of current bullying policy and complaint processes used by the organisation and another was asked about the types of bullying complaints received by HR personnel in that organisation and how they were managed. Each of these small groups was asked to feedback their views to the larger group. This feedback and subsequent discussions were audio recorded, although the recording was poor quality, again because of the size of the room. However, the researcher took notes about the conversations. Further, in order to gain as much material from the group, participants in the small groups were encouraged to write down on large sheets of butcher's paper, the main points and arguments that they presented back to the larger group. The sheets of butcher's paper were collected at the end of the focus groups discussion and formed part of the analysis.

As suggested by Barbour (2007), immediate observation about the group discussion and dynamics was documented after each focus group. These written observations assisted in drawing attention to themes, disagreements and specific discussions that stood out in the focus group as being important or relevant. These field notes are similar to those outlined by Marshall and Rossman (1999) as being important in drawing the researcher's attention to interesting or common issues that were uncovered during the discussion.

The focus groups lasted between one and a half and two hours. The following questions were utilised as a topic guide, to lead discussion. While the questions were put to each group for discussion, they were not rigorously adhered to, rather spontaneous discussion about topics of particular relevance for the group meant that at times some questions were not raised specifically, but may have been taken up as part of another discussion. Question 1 was given to all groups and opened the discussion.

1. What behaviours are bullying targets reporting and who are the perpetrators?
2. How are complaints of bullying usually resolved? It appeared from the previous studies in this thesis that many complaint policies give the *complainant* the choice of how they want their complaint resolved. How does this influence your management of these complaints?
3. What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of your current bullying and harassment grievance policy?

## **12.4 Analysis of Results**

When analysing focus-group data, Barbour (2007, 2008) suggests using a pragmatic version of grounded theory, which unlike the early grounded theory practice utilised by Corban and Strauss (1990), makes use of past research to position the current study. She argues that unless the researcher has a thorough knowledge of the current state of research in a particular area, it is difficult to identify how further research adds to this knowledge (Barbour, 2008). Therefore, in the current study, initial questions were framed from a familiarity with the bullying research to date and the results of the previous studies.



Analysis involves initially generating provisional themes from the data, which in the initial stages of analysis meant that a priori codes that reflect the wording of a question in the interview schedule and topic (Barbour, 2008) were developed. From these provisional codes, additional themes become known through analysis of the discussions, which involved identifying including similarities and contradictions between what the focus group participants were discussing. Barbour (2008) suggests using a constant comparative methodology, which involves identifying patterns, exceptions and themes in focus-group discussions. This means that the discussions within each focus group and between the different focus groups were scrutinised in order to identify common themes (i.e. when participants agreed about a certain topic), or when exceptions or disagreements were recognised. These similarities and exceptions are highlighted and discussed in relation to the specific question

## Chapter 13: Results of the HR Focus-Group Study

Data obtained from the surveys will be reported first, followed by the themes that emerged from the focus-group discussions. Following the results and main themes being presented, conclusions and recommendations arising from this study will be discussed in chapter 13.

### 13.1 Survey Data

All focus-group participants reported that their organisation had a bullying and harassment policy and grievance procedure. One of the participants in the School Focus Group reported that their school's policy and complaint procedure was currently under review and was being redrafted in line with an emphasis on respectful behaviour and pastoral care for all employees. Rather than being named a Bullying and Harassment Policy, it was to be called the Respectful Behaviour Policy. All policies and procedures addressed discrimination, sexual harassment and bullying together in the one policy. Definitions of discrimination, sexual harassment and bullying were provided, along with behavioural examples in all policies.

All grievance procedures had multiple access points ranging from what was named *informal interventions* (self-help, manager intervention, informal mediation) to *formal intervention* (mediation and/or investigation). Mediation was placed in both informal and formal intervention strategies. In order for the formal intervention to be carried out, all policies required a complaint to be in writing. Formal complaints were usually submitted to the organisation's chief executive officer, school principal or an HR senior consultant. All procedures suggested that in the first instance informal complaints were to be managed by the complainant's line manager, a

manager in a different department or a more senior manager. A complainant could raise matters directly with an HR consultant if they wanted to, bypassing their manager. All policies informed the complainant that they were also able to exercise their legal right to submit a complaint of sexual harassment or discrimination directly with the SAEOC, or a complaint of bullying with Safe Work SA. This legal right was made explicit in all the policies. All complaint procedures emphasised the right of the complainant to choose how they wanted their complaint resolved.

As illustrated in Table 13.1, there was a wide range of training that participants had undertaken to manage workplace conflicts. Six participants reported having undertaken some ‘in-house’ conflict-management training, which ranged from two- to four-hour workshops, focusing on general conflict management to focusing on managing workplace bullying complaints in line with the organisational policy. Two participants reported having undertaken a technical and further education (TAFE) course on conflict management. The majority of participants (14) had undertaken professional conflict-management training through university or through nationally recognised mediation-training groups such as LEADR<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> LEADR (Leading Edge Alternate Dispute Resolvers) is an Australasian, not-for-profit membership organisation formed in 1989 to promote and facilitate the use of dispute-resolution processes including mediation. LEADR provides training in a range of dispute-resolution areas including mediation from basic skills through to advanced workshops and continuing professional development.

Table 13.1  
*Conflict-Management Training Undertaken by Focus-Group Participants*

Type of training.	No training	2-4 hours In-house training	TAFE course	University Conflict Management Training	Post Graduate Conflict Management Training	Other
<b>Number of Participants</b>  (Note N does not reflect number of participants in the focus groups. Some participants did not respond to the question, others had undertaken more than one type of training)	6	13	2	4	3	7
<b>Comments made by some of the participants</b>	Learned on the job  Years of HR practice  No formal training  Self taught	Crucial Conversation course 12 months ago  Contact Officer training (4 hour course)		Part of Graduate Diploma in Human Resource Management  Part of Social Work course  Part of Rehabilitation Diploma (two participants)	Through Masters in Organisational Psychology course (two participants)  One subject in Graduate Certificate in HR – Conflict Management Theories	Five Participants reported having competed LEADR accredited mediation training  Two participants reported having competed HREOC conciliation training (three day course)

### 13.2 Analysis of Focus-Group Conversations

As expected, the themes from the focus-groups discussions closely reflected the questions posed and four main themes emerged from the discussions: 1) *bullying viewed as conflict*; 2) *tension between the formal and informal complaint-resolution processes*; 3) *conflict-management training as an early intervention*; and 4) *lack of formal follow-up as a gap in policy*. The themes were interlinked, and because bullying complaints were viewed almost unanimously as unresolved conflict by the

HR consultants, complainants were urged to resolve their complaint within this paradigm. It appeared from the discussions that at times this created significant tension between the complainants' desire to have their allegations of bullying investigated and HR's view of the allegation as unresolved conflict that should be resolved in a conciliatory manner. Coupled with this tension was an emphasis on early conflict management of complaints. However, participants in the focus groups also drew attention to the reluctance of some managers to recognise they needed conflict-management training, and there was, in some organisations, an inability of some managers to take up training opportunities because of financial constraints. Finally, the lack of formal follow-up was recognised as a gap in procedures and was viewed by one group as a reason why unhappy complainants lodge complaints with the SAEOC and other external statutory jurisdictions.

### **13.2.1 Bullying as a subjective term**

A clear theme to emerge from the discussions was that the term *bullying* was very subjective and meant different things depending on who was using it. From an HR perspective, bullying was objectively defined in all workplace bullying and harassment policies. When asked what bullying was, all participants were quick to recite the definition of bullying in their policy and in the OHSW legislation:

Researcher: So you are talking about that bullying behaviour ... in what way are you using the term *bullying*? What do you mean?

Participant: Oh, the occupational health and safety definition of bullying, you know ... repeated, systematic, threatening, humiliating, offensive ...

As described above, the OHSW definition of workplace bullying was immediately cited as being the definition of bullying recognised by focus-group participants. Participants in the other focus groups also recognised and spoke in terms of this definition. All participants referred to bullying in terms of behaviour that was ‘repeated, systematic and threatening’ and were familiar with this definition. However, despite this, participants in all the focus groups were unanimous that the majority of bullying complaints made by staff were not bullying according to that definition, but were conflicts or disputes about other issues that had been framed as bullying. According to focus-group participants, bullying complaints, as defined under the policy definition of bullying, were rare. For example, in the Health Focus Group the following dialogue occurred:

A lot of bullying complaints that come through aren't actually bullying. You wipe out 90% straight away from actually bullying. In my experience it's more about conflict and one person being perceived that they're being bullied, but in fact more about they're being the victim and their inability to get on with the other person because you'll find that when you speak to a complainant and then you go and speak to the person who has been alleged against, they will have exactly the same feelings against this one. They feel as though they are being bullied as well, so one will react with say going down a formal path, an allegation of bullying against the other party. So it's people who just are not getting on in a lot of cases, not necessarily one person being a bully against someone else ...

There is a lack of understanding of what bullying is. People lump everything into bullying. They go ‘oh this is bullying,’ although they've got the policy and procedure that provide the definition, they obviously haven't read properly what the definition of bullying is. They've lumped the behaviour into the bullying classification. A lot of bullying complaints that come through aren't actually bullying. (Health Focus-Group Participant)

The transcript cited above described the strong view by all focus groups that most bullying complaints received by the focus group participants were not bullying according to the definition (in terms of repeated, systematic, threatening, humiliating, offensive behaviour), but were a wide range of interpersonal conflicts that had been labelled bullying by the complainant. The participant cited above, reported that 90 per cent of bullying complaints received by HR were about conflicts and were not bullying.

When asked why complainants may lodge bullying complaints that are not bullying, some participants talked about complainants needing an avenue to complain about behaviours that they did not like and have conflicts managed by a third party. If aggrieved employees framed the conflict as bullying then they were able to access the complaints' procedure in the bullying policy. For example, a participant in the Government Focus Group said the following:

I think a lot of the stuff starts off with interpersonal conflict—I don't like the way you park your car, I don't like the fact you park your car along side of me because my car is my pride and joy and you treat yours badly and you might open the door and scratch me; and that then turns into a bullying complaint—he continues to park along side of me ... The fact that there is only one car park left in the area is irrelevant, so it is all about how can I make this conflict fit the policy and so they go to the policy and the policy says this and this and so it is framed as bullying. (Government Focus-Group Participant)

The participant cited above supported what was discussed in the Health Focus Group that complainants at times frame conflict as bullying in order to utilise the complaint process. This was an opinion expressed in all the focus groups. A

participant in the Mixed Group talked about why she thought complainants may want to label a dispute as bullying rather than identify the dispute as a conflict:

So for someone to say that they have been involved in a conflict there is implication that they have some responsibility, whereas if I say I am being bullied, some of that responsibility is taken away from someone who views themselves as a victim. (Mixed Focus-Group Participant)

From this participant's perspective, labelling a conflict as bullying provides a way for one party in the conflict (the complainant) to frame themselves as an injured party, and therefore avoid taking responsibility for their part in the conflict.

However, an alternative viewpoint was raised by another participant in the Mixed Focus Group. This participant was a consultant at the EOC and reported that while complainants often talk about one incident of negative behaviour that could be identified as a conflict or might not fit the definition of bullying, upon questioning, a number of other incidents that show a pattern of negative behaviours could emerge. He said the following:

Where in a lot of cases I think people will put up with [conflict] for a while before they will actually make a complaint. There is a threshold that they need to get to before they will take action. So, there often is repeated behaviour, but the thing that they complain about is often the straw that breaks the camel's back ... so I suspect that there is often repeated behaviour there that is not brought out initially. May come out with a bit more digging. (Mixed Focus-Group Participant)

This participant offered an alternative view that complainants will tolerate significant conflict before complaining to someone about it. He said that initially complainants may complain about one incident and it will appear that their complaint does not fit the definition of bullying. However, after some investigation there will



be repeated behaviours that suggest a pattern of bullying. This participant worked at the Equal Opportunity Commission and reported that the Commission received a number of complaints of discrimination and harassment that had been minimised by the organisation and framed as interpersonal conflicts or over-sensitive employees. When the complaint of discrimination or harassment was investigated by the Commission, it appeared likely that there had been an element of harassment, discrimination or bullying. He believed that at times some organisations were too quick to label complaints as conflict or personality clashes, and that was one of the reasons complainants lodged complaints with the Equal Opportunity Commission.

Some participants believed that having a policy called *bullying and harassment* contributed to conflicts being framed as bullying by the complainant, even though the policy was clear as to what behaviours constituted workplace bullying and what behaviours did not. Particularly, senior HR practitioners in participants in the Health Focus Group, and one of the participants in the Mixed focus group voiced strong opinions that the policy emphasis needed to shift from *bullying* to *conflict* or *respectful behaviours* and they believed that policies highlighting bullying had the potential to encourage bullying complaints:

What we're saying is that the conversation is already about bullying because the policy's about bullying. If they'd accessed a respectful behavioural conflict-management policy from the intranet in the first place the conversation may not be about bullying. So the point we're making throughout this is that it too quickly leads to bullying complaints and formal processes and stuff. (Senior HR practitioner, Health Focus-Group Participant)

I would rather promote a concept of respectful behaviour rather than constantly reinforcing the construct of bullying. Actually there is less bullying in an organisation than there is conflict. Bullying is overrated so

what we really should be focusing on is conflict resolution and promoting respectful behaviours. Because conflict is inevitable in any organisation conflict happens, it's about how you manage it and deal with and resolve it or agree to disagree. (Health Focus-Group Participant)

If you've got a bullying policy and that's the first option that people are looking at, then that becomes a bullying investigation. You're making it a bullying issue by that's what your policy is all about, that's what your employee is reading about that's how it's dealt with. (Mixed Focus-Group Participant)

The minute we hear people are so stressed that they are looking at a definition of what constitutes bullying ... you are never going to make any difference. Because by the time it gets to that, they are what I call in the trenches and lobbing the hand grenades and all you are going to at the end of the day is count the bodies. (Government Focus-Group Participant)

As illustrated by the excerpts above, there was a strong focus in three of the focus groups, in particular in the health focus group that bullying policies and complaint procedures contributed to complainants labelling conflicts as workplace bullying. The participants in the extracts above appeared to believe that bullying policies encourage complaints to lodge formal bullying complaints and structure their conflict as bullying. In the last excerpt above from a participant in the Government Focus Group, she described employees searching for definitions of bullying so that they could describe their conflict in terms of the bullying definition. In support of this, another participant in the Mixed Focus Group reported that at times, she had both the bully and target reporting victimisation as a result of the conflict between them, and both had described the conflict as bullying, naming the other person a bully. From her perspective, the person who first lodged the complaint was given the label as the victim while the respondent (the person who did not lodge

the complaint first) was labelled the bully, even though both were equally responsible for the escalation of the conflict in which they were embroiled. She reported the following:

I then went back to my files and it seemed to me in that reading those it was the person who went forward first got named as the complainant and the other person as the respondent or bully. Where in fact they could both speak to practices or a conflict and name some practices that might have fitted with the definition of bullying. (Mixed Focus-Group Participant)

As described above, the participant considered the mediations that she had conducted and reflected that in many cases, both the complainant and the respondent at times behaved in ways that could be interpreted as bullying. From the participant's perspective, the person who lodged the complaint was named as the complainant and the other person as the bully.

In contrast to the norm of policies being named as bullying and harassment policies and complaint procedures, one participant reported that her organisation had replaced a 'bullying policy' with one that shifted the emphases from bullying and other negative behaviours to promoting a positive culture. Complaints were therefore framed in relation to breaches in the code of conduct rather than specifically about bullying:

One of the things we have tried to do is actually define the kinds of behaviours we want to see in the school. Taking a proactive stance and defining the sorts of behaviours we want to see. So that all adults in the workplace practice these so rather than focusing on the negative component this is what bullying looks like—we have got that in there [the policy] but we focus on the types of behaviours we want to see. We have a code of conduct that says there are our values and this is what they look like in practice. It seems to me that that is one way—it's not the only way, but it is one way of

shifting the emphasis away from bullying, or negative behaviours, towards positive behaviours. (School Focus-Group Participant)

The participant above talked about the school's policy focusing on respectful behaviour, rather than defining and outlining bullying as a specific issue. She reported that the organisation shifted the emphases away from negative behaviours, toward promoting a culture of respectful behaviour aligned with a code of conduct. Complainants utilising the policy and procedures referred to specific behaviours that breached the code of conduct, rather than the labels of bullying or harassment.

In contrast to this dominant view, of all bullying complaints being conflicts, one participant in the Mixed Focus Group talked about the difference between conflict and bullying in terms of the power differential involved in bullying. From her perspective, ongoing conflict between a subordinate and manager could be viewed as bullying if the manager was too aggressive, because of the power difference between them, even if the conflict were over performance-based issues. This was the only participant in any of the focus groups who discussed the issue of power turning a conflict situation into one where the less powerful may view it as bullying:

I see bullying as different from conflict as there is generally a power gradient that is relevant, and so I think that people who talk about feeling bullied will talk about having wanted to resolve the conflict but not felt that they have had the capacity to do that given the differential power in the relationship. So if it is a performance-based issue they may feel aggrieved that a decision has been made about their performance and wish to discuss it but feel as if that option is closed off, so I see it in those terms and always have seen how long it takes before people start to declare themselves as being bullied or made to feel uncomfortable. I think if you just have a conflict model it is still making an

assumption that there is an equal relationship and I don't think that is always the case. (Mixed Focus-Group Participant)

It was interesting to note that this was the only participant who articulated one of the key differences between bullying and conflict; that is, the power imbalance between the parties in dispute. As stated above, describing the dispute as a conflict assumes that there is an equal relationship between the parties, and that is not always the case.

### **13.2.2 Types of conflicts**

In line with the emphases on framing bullying complaints as conflict, the focus groups identified a range of conflict situations that resulted in bullying complaints. These were conflicts between staff members, conflicts between staff members and management, conflicts related to performance-management decisions and conflicts due to insensitive managers. Participants in the Health Focus Group also identified the *serial complainant* as a concern that was brought to their attention by managers from time to time; that is, an employee who regularly complained about bullying when they were not being bullied. From their perspective, this serial complainant made a number of unfounded bullying allegations in a number of departments and had to be performance managed with the complaining behaviour itself being treated as problematic.

It was interesting to note that when managers were described as a bully by complainants, the focus-group participants, especially in the Government Focus Group and Health Focus Group framed the perpetrator's behaviour as insensitive or lacking in insight, rather than as bullying. The managers/perpetrators were described in terms of poor managers trying to address performance concerns with

difficult or overly sensitive staff. For example, in the transcript cited below, this HR professional talked about a bullying complaint against a manager with whom she and another HR practitioner dealt:

Just thinking of one that [name] and I have been dealing with here recently, it was around a manager being accused of bullying. He just lacked sensitivity and insight really, and the complaint was put in writing but it hadn't escalated to the point of no return. (Government Focus-Group Participant)

As illustrated above, the manager who was accused of bullying was viewed by these practitioners as lacking sensitivity and insight, and although the complaint was a written complaint of workplace bullying, it was dealt with within a conflict-management framework.

In a similar manner, a participant in the Health Focus Group talked about poor leadership being a precursor to bullying complaints being lodged. She said the following:

The reasons why it gets to that stage [a bullying complaint] is poor leadership in a particular team, whereby the behaviour has not been addressed but has been allowed to continue and so part of my strategy is actually looking at ways to help the leadership in that team ... to ensure there is respectful behaviour training, to ensure that there are performance-development opportunities for staff and that they are given those performance appraisals because they haven't been. To be sure there is consistent application of procedures within the team so you haven't got one nurse doing something one way and following a process and then another one doing it another way and then at each other because they are not applying things consistently, so really a lot of it is leadership of the team. (Health Focus-Group Participant)

Again, the participant above talked about bullying complaints in terms of poor leadership and outlined the types of assistance she gave managers to improve

their leadership skills after they had been accused of bullying. An interesting discussion was held in the Health Focus Group where conflict between managers and their staff was discussed. Participants noted that although there is conflict between the two parties, they reported that often managers do not put in a complaint against their staff member:

Participant A: ...I think though that other people view that most allegations are against managers because although managers often experience intimidation from their subordinates which could be regarded as bullying or all sorts of other behaviour that could conceivably fit the definition or not, they very rarely lodge bullying allegations themselves so I actually think that there is a bit of a skewing in those statements about most bullying is done by managers.

Participant B: That's reported...

Participant C: Yeah...

Participant A: ... Of the majority of the complaints of bullying allegations against managers, it's managers who are trying to address the performance of that individual...

Participant C: Exactly, and often you'll find from what I've talked about with people is that often the person who lodged the complaint is often a fairly significant bully themselves. Not always.

Participant A: I think it's partly around a lack of understanding on everyone's part probably about what is reasonable management direction done in a reasonable manner versus ... what's not. That is really important ... that's something that we've been talking about with our injury management colleagues because when they're trying to determine whether a worker's comp. claim should be accepted apparently the definition is, is this reasonable management direction delivered in a reasonable manner? If so, it isn't necessarily a logical consequence that the claim should be accepted.

This exchange of views between participants in the Health Focus Group cited above, illustrated the tendency that a number of participants expressed in taking the side of managers who are accused of bullying. Participant A reported that managers rarely lodge bullying complaints, despite experiencing intimidation by subordinates. However, she said that despite this, most allegations are against managers. However, this is because staff do not understand what ‘reasonable management direction’ is, and as such, when investigated, most complaints are not substantiated. It is noteworthy that participant C, above, reports that the person who lodges the bullying complaint against their manager is often a ‘significant bully themselves’.

These views support studies that suggest that one of the ways organisations primarily deal with bullying is to focus on policies and complaint procedures that provide a good theoretical model of how to address workplace bullying, but treat actual bullying complaints as personality clashes or conflicts, taking on the manager’s perception that the complainant is a difficult employee (Ferris, 2004). These results support Salin’s (2009) findings that organisations, although reporting a zero tolerance of bullying, are more likely to take a restorative approach to complaints, because they view bullying in terms of conflict, poor leadership or management of difficult staff.

### **13.2.3 The complaint procedure**

The third theme that emerged early in analysis of the focus-group conversations was the *degree of control* that most complaint procedures gave the complainant. This was viewed as a concern by a number of the participants. Most focus-group participants felt that the complaint procedures gave the complainant considerable power over how their bullying complaint was to be managed, and this



appeared to make the focus-group participants uncomfortable. All focus-group participants described trying to encourage complainants to utilise more informal resolution processes, but many complainants apparently resisted this, preferring a more formal procedure such as an investigation into their allegations. The more experienced HR practitioners talked about their ability to assist the complainant in resolving the issues in an informal manner, but less experienced practitioners found this difficult.

Within the context of the previous themes discussed, this is very interesting and illustrates the tension between the HR professional, who views the bullying allegation as conflict and maybe more likely to side with a manager, and the complainant, who appears to be reluctant to address the complaint through ADR processes as encouraged by the HR practitioner, preferring an independent investigation of their allegations. A complainant who does not believe that their bullying complaint is being managed fairly, may push for a formal investigation rather than allow the HR practitioner to mediate between themselves and the alleged perpetrator.

While some focus-group participants wanted to manage the complaint informally, others felt that they could not intervene unless the complainant gave them consent, and the complaint had to be managed in line with how the complainant wanted it to be managed. There was considerable debate in some focus groups in relation to the ‘duty of care of managers’ to act on complaints with or without complainant permission. Particularly in the School Focus Group, one senior HR consultant believed that unless the complainant gave him permission, he was unable to act on the complaint at all. Others in the group disagreed and said that if there was

a complaint made, they had to take some form of intervention whether the complainant wanted them to or not. For example, one participant stated the following:

Once a complaint is formally made either verbally or in writing then we are free to act with the permission of the complainant. Other than that we feel they can't act on innuendo or verbal complaint where the complainant says they are just getting it off their chest. (School Focus-Group Participant)

As described above, the participant believed that he was able to take action on a complaint *only* if it was formally made, either in writing, or if the complainant indicated that it was a 'formal verbal complaint'. However, he believed that he still needed that complainant's permission to speak with the other party or to intervene. However, if the complaint was just 'getting it [the complaint] off their chest' he believed that he could not take any action. It was unclear from that conversation what constituted a 'formal' verbal complaint and one where a complaint was 'just getting it off their chest'.

The discussions elicited diverse viewpoints in regard to the level of control the complainants had in regard to how their complaint is managed. However, the predominant perspective was that the complainants had too much control over how their complaint was addressed:

They [the complainant] have the power to decide how this is going to be conducted. They can go formal, informal and they hold all the cards when it comes to, they can go to Safe Work SA to have it investigated, there is no directing them back towards the informal. (Health Focus-Group Participant)

I think that policy should not say that the complainant has the right to choose. I think that it should be somehow, I think there should be some sort of process that they have to go to through, an assessment or mediation first to

see whether it can't be resolved informally in the first instant. (Health Focus-Group Participant)

There is the other side where they get pedantic and say point 1, 2, 3 [in your policy] says you will investigate it, or do whatever, and this is what they say, and they say —S you have to do that.” (Government Focus-Group Participant)

As described in the excerpts cited above, there were mixed views about the level of influence or intervention HR practitioners could exercise in regard to a complaint, without the complainant's express permission. Most participants voiced frustration at the complainant's right to choose and HR's inability to have the complaint assessed as suitable for mediation or more informal intervention strategies. The less experienced members of the focus groups appeared to be very process-orientated and were happier to follow the policy and complaint procedure, which provided them with a set process. However, as portrayed in the last transcript cited above, one participant expressed frustration at the „pedantic complainants“ who insisted the complaint procedures were followed explicitly.

It appeared that the more experienced HR professionals used their skills to guide the complainant through a conflict-management approach that they felt would resolve rather than escalate the allegation. In line with this, one participant in the School Focus Group talked about how following the receipt of a bullying complaint via e-mail, he actively assisted both parties to resolve the issue. Once again the bullying complaint was framed in terms of conflict and was managed within a conflict-resolution paradigm. It is interesting to note that this participant is a senior manager acting in an HR role and has had formal training in mediation and conflict-coaching:

I got an e-mail from a staff member that said in the e-mail that he is being bullied; and so you get out of your chair and you immediately go over there and you begin the [complaint-management] process. The process then is to spend time interviewing that person about what he has reported, and then to outline that I will be talking to the other person and that these are the possible options. ... in this particular instance I interviewed the so-called victim and the perpetrator three times before I brought them together. Between the time I was able to bring them together, what was initially a very strong bullying complaint ended up being —“We have had a disagreement and I would like an apology” and the word “bullying” never entered the final meeting. By having the time to spend with these people before the mediation I was at least able to take what I thought—this is not bullying, and so to get that language down to what I thought was actually was going on between those two and get that emotion right down to a realistic level before we had that [final] meeting. (School Focus-Group Participant)

As outlined above, this senior practitioner in the School Focus Group was able to utilise his conflict-management skills to de-escalate and mediate the bullying complaint he received. It is interesting to note that he did not think that the complaint was bullying and was able to de-escalate the emotion between the parties in dispute and bring them together to resolve the issues. Similar to the participant quoted above, two senior HR consultants in the Government Focus Group reflected on how their practice has changed with experience. They reflected that initially they followed the organisational complaint procedures rigidly, but they now intervened more informally and assisted the parties to resolve what they viewed as conflict between a manager and subordinate instead of bullying. They said the following:

Participant A: I think we get a fair amount of say [about how a complaint is managed] really, because I think that we influence ... and I think we influence from that point of fairness and reasonableness and those sorts of

things. And if we use the example I gave you before, that started off with the person putting in a written complaint, probably their acceptable resolution at the time would have been the death of one or two people (laughing); and now we have that person who for most of the time is very reasonable.

Researcher: How did you get there?

Participant A: By talking to her and the manager about ...

Participant B: [interrupting] My view was that the response that the manager had taken was not all that reasonable, and asking that person to step back and view how they had been dealing with it and we both did the same thing with both parties and we might not necessarily get the best outcome in the world but I think that HR generally can influence these things a lot, but that is built through years of experience.

Participant A: We do that now, but in the past you wouldn't say we did that would you?

Participant B: No. In the past they would be isolated and investigated, and the policy would say this, and you were virtually guilty until proven innocent. Rather than the ability we now have is to ok now let's look at it and see what is going on. (Government Focus-Group Participants)

As illustrated, above, even in situations where the manager had not been all that reasonable', and perhaps bullying had occurred, these senior HR practitioners in the Government Focus Group sought to influence the way the complaint was managed. They talked about how in the past the complaint would be investigated, but now with experience, they talked to both parties and tried to mediate an outcome, instead of investigating the allegation.

The following excerpt from the Health Focus Group illustrates the diversity and range of experience in the group about how to best manage a bullying complaint. The less experienced participants talked out the importance of following the

complaint procedure and appear to be very process driven even though they report not necessarily agreeing with the procedures prescribed by the policy. However, the more experienced participant (participant D) below talks about discussing the policy options with the complainant and encouraging less formal options to resolving the complaint:

Participant A: It doesn't mean we agree with what's in the policy but at least it does provide a process to follow and provides some kind of a starting point and a framework for the complaint to be processed through.

Researcher: Starting point? Where is that starting point?

Participant A: The employee will probably get hold of the policy and have a look at and decide it's a bullying issue and put in some kind of a complaint. So it gives all parties a starting point. When the first meeting takes place that [policy] document is often on the table as you are working through it and trying to clarify whether to go formal or informal ...

Participant B: They usually access it off the internet and go OK I've been bullied then write a letter saying I wish to lodge a formal grievance. I believe I've been bullied and this is the reason ...

Participant A: We're not sticking up for it, we actually disagree with it; but it does achieve those things but there are a lot more negative things.

Participant C: It clarifies the key things though. It defines what bullying actually is...

Participant D: ... there is a huge lack of understanding of what bullying is. People lump everything into bullying. They go oh this is bullying, although they've got the policy and procedure that they obviously haven't read properly what the definition of bullying is. They've lumped the behaviour into the bullying classification.

Participant A: Sometimes it might be misconduct on another level, it might not be bullying but it still might require an investigation if they want one,

even though it doesn't fit the definition of what they classify it as. It's still misconduct and subject directly to punishment. It's not bullying but needs to be investigated because the policy gives that option if they want it. I'd still investigate that.

Participant D: No not necessarily investigate, but deal with the fact of somebody coming and saying that they feel they've been bullied. It's not a question of investigating it formally or informally, you might actually go through processes to resolve it in a different way.

Participant A: Even if they say they want it to be investigated? You have to do what option they want ...

Participant D: Well ... we'll just say hang on let's just have a discussion about it first. What are the consequences? What you will achieve out of this? If you are insisting going formal do you realise it will involve this, this and this. Is that what this is really about, is that what you want?

This transcript above outlines different views by HR practitioners within the same organisation about how to manage bullying complaints. Participant A is less experienced and believes that she needs to manage bullying complaints according to how the complainant instructs, even if she doesn't agree it is the right way, or doesn't believe that the complaint meets the definition of bullying. However, Participant D, the more experienced practitioner, talks about having a discussion with the complainant first and using her influence to have the complaint addressed in a less formal way.

The focus-group participants were unanimous in their views that the formal process (investigation) did not assist parties to resolve conflicts, but escalated disputes between the parties. Some of the comments made by participants in relation to this discussion were as follows:

Rarely anything to be gained by a formal process. (Health Focus-Group Participant)

Lack of understanding of what bullying is, leads too quickly into the formal process. (Health Focus-Group Participant)

If somebody chooses to take the formal process they can elect to do that, the complainant can choose to do that; and nearly always what they don't understand is that by going through a formal process there will be some kind of investigation to determine whether there has been bullying or not. (Health Focus-Group Participant)

I think the formal system starts when a complaint is lodged, but I think we need to look much before that in terms of how to deal with the conflict before getting into formal investigations of complaint. (School Focus-Group Participant)

As described above, the participants believed that the formal complaint system, that is investigation, tended to escalate the dispute and was an adversarial process. One participant reported that there is 'rarely anything to be gained' by utilising the formal process, and all participants believed that a less formal conciliatory intervention that focused on conflict management should be prioritised.

Again, the discussion below illustrates the strong push for complainants to utilise informal conciliatory processes to address their bullying complaint:

Participant A: Well that's what we're pushing, [the informal process] that's what we encourage and as soon as we are made aware of a complaint ... we'll explain what that means and really encourage them and if they haven't gone through the self-help and informal process first we would be really reluctant to accept a formal complaint. So we really encourage them to allow us to look into it on their behalf or to investigate it with the manager on an informal basis to try and resolve it.

Participant B: So what do you call informal?



Participant A: Mediation first.

Participant B: I think the really important thing is to avoid the formal process at every single possible way. There is absolutely nothing to be gained from the formal process; that's my view. What we're doing is encouraging both parties to find all the evidence to validate their point of view and also a whole pile of witnesses so everybody else gets involved and none of us have ever seen it resolved formally. (Health Focus Group)

As described above, these participants in the Health Focus Group discussed how they encourage complainants to utilise informal processes such as mediation and actively discourage the formal (investigation) process being initiated. Participant B reported that there was 'absolutely nothing to be gained' from the formal process as she believed that it failed to actually resolve the conflict.

#### **13.2.4 Follow-up after complaint resolution**

When discussing the gaps in policy and complaints' procedures, follow-up was recognised as an important aspect of complaint resolution, and lack of formal follow-up or debriefing was seen as a gap in policy. Most follow-up after complaints had been resolved was carried out informally and appeared to be related to the level of experience and confidence of the HR professional who had been managing the complaint. Only the Government Focus Group had a mandatory follow-up of complaints written into their complaint policy and procedures. Other focus groups recognised this as a gap in their policy:

That's a gap. That's a definite gap. Well not necessarily at the top but as follow-up generally. In terms of the policy procedures I'm saying it's a gap, I'm not saying it doesn't actually occur because often a consultant working with a case will develop a performance plan or strategic recommendations for

actions and so forth. But it's not really documented that that's what should occur. (Health Focus-Group Participant)

I don't think we have specified what happens at the end. I reckon talking about the complaint process we do underline pastoral care as being important all the way through. We don't have a formal follow-up process as such. (Mixed Focus-Group Participant)

As described above, lack of formal follow-up was seen as a gap in policy.

Follow-up often occurred when an HR consultant assisted in developing a performance plan or recommendations for future actions with complaint participants following the resolution of a complaint. However, follow-up from this perspective was viewed as managing performance of parties as opposed to debriefing for the individuals involved, with an opportunity for them to talk through the complaint process. In contrast to the view expressed above, a participant in the Mixed Focus Group talked of 'pastoral care' being important, in order to ensure the wellbeing of employees, although once again there was no formal follow-up written into the complaint process. The participant, cited below, made the comment that 'no news is good news,' suggesting that she was reluctant to follow up complaints because the follow-up may exacerbate underlying tensions:

A lot of the time no news is good news so if we don't hear anything else then we assume it's ok, but if we've got a relationship with that manager anyway, when we catch up we'll say how's it going? (Health Focus-Group Participant)

The participant described assuming that the issues had been resolved if she did not hear from the complainant or respondent following the resolution of a complaint. However, if she had a relationship with the manager involved in the complaint then she would follow-up to see 'how it was going'. This point of view

highlights the bias towards taking the perspective of and supporting managers during the complaint process—a theme previously discussed.

In contrast with the other focus groups, participants in the Government Focus Group talked about the importance of follow-up. While not mandated as part of their policy, the HR practitioners in this focus group emphasised the importance of following up any major incidents that affected staff, including complaints of workplace bullying:

Participant 1: Follow-up is critical. If you don't have effective follow-up it is not worthwhile. We do this with all of our staff.

Researcher: When you say follow-up are you talking about following up after a complaint?

Participant 1: After any group incident there is follow-up as a major component of that, and one-on-one with people who have lodged a bullying complaint, I will keep in touch with that person and we will follow-up as to how things are going. I mean if they plainly don't want me to be in their face I won't do it and I'm plainly not in anybody's face. That's not how it works but always try to maintain a relationship with the parties in those circumstances. Because I think it is critical that they think well you know, you have told me that stuff, but you got to have that continuity.

Participant 2: If a person goes back to work and nothing has changed, and nobody is accepting any responsibility for driving at change, then it is only a matter of time before the same thing happens again.

Participant 3: It comes back to your policy and procedures then doesn't it, where the policy supports the procedures in that we will say we will investigate and we will do this and that.. So in the end HR have done its job and there is nothing found; and then often HR will then walk away and say well we have done our job and that's it. But it's not it. If a person goes back to work and nothing has changed, and nobody is accepting any responsibility

for driving that change, then it is only a matter of time before the same thing happens again, so follow-up is really important.

The participants in the Mixed Focus Group cited above, describe the critical importance of follow-up after the resolution of complaints. Participant 1 reported that after a bullying complaint she offers one-to-one follow-up with the complainant. Participant 2 noted the importance of following up in order to ensure that changes are maintained and said that if there is no sustained change then it is only a matter of time before the same thing [i.e. another bullying complaint] happens again'. The third participant noted that the job of HR practitioners goes beyond ensuring the policy and procedures are followed, because even if the process is adhered to, the job (i.e. resolving the complaint) is not completed if sustained change has not been implemented.

It was interesting to note that one participant in the Mixed Focus Group who was a consultant at the EOC reported that one of the reasons that complaints of discrimination and harassment are lodged with the EOC was because of lack of follow-up from the complainant's organisation:

Often they come here because it isn't dealt with or followed up internally so the behaviour just doesn't stop. Also the complainant gives up on the (internal) process because they haven't been given feedback about what's happening. They haven't been told what the results of the investigation are or that kind of thing so they feel as though it hasn't been dealt with and it is never going to resolve it and so that's why they come here. (Mixed Focus-Group Participant, EOC consultant)

This participant articulated clearly the importance of follow-up with complainants, and reflected that complaints are lodged with the EOC because they are not dealt with properly in the complainant's place of work. He believed the

complainant gives up on the organisation's internal complaint-handling process because they are not been given adequate feedback about outcomes of investigations, or they feel that their complaint has not been dealt with adequately. This perspective can be contrasted with some of the points of view shared in other focus groups, especially from the Health Focus Group, where feedback and follow-up was carried out on an ad hoc basis and where no news was good news'.

## **Chapter 14: Conclusions and Recommendations from the HR Focus-Group Study**

The main contribution of this study has been to provide insights into the way HR practitioners address workplace bullying complaints. The types of bullying complaints received by HR practitioners were discussed in the focus groups and the way that the participants managed these complaints of bullying was also discussed. Furthermore, the gaps in bullying complaint procedures from the perspective of the focus-group participants were identified. These gaps were perceived by participants as the ability of complainants to choose the way they wanted their complaint resolved and the lack of formal follow-up in many policies was identified as a gap within the complaint procedures.

### **14.1 Policies and Complaint Procedures**

All organisations participating in the focus groups had workplace bullying and harassment policies that provided a number of avenues for aggrieved employees to complain about workplace bullying. In terms of the content of the policies and complaint procedures, the organisations represented followed the recommendations provided by both the SAEOC and the South Australian Round Table on Workplace Bullying. The policy and complaint procedures also adhered to recommendations made by Richards and Daley (2003) and Costantino and Merchant (1996) in terms of having a statement of commitment, definitions of bullying, responsibilities of both employees and managers prescribed, as well as having a complaints' procedure with multiple access points ranging from informal mediation, through to a formal investigation procedure. However, despite policies adhering to these

recommendations, there was a strong push in all of the focus groups to move away from policies being labelled ‘\_bullying’ or ‘\_bullying and harassment’ towards being framed in a more positive way such as ‘\_respectful workplace behaviour’ policies and complaint procedures. One of the focus group participants from a religious school reported that the schools new policy they were developing had addressed this, and the health focus group and a participant in the mixed focus group reported that this was something they were considering in future policy development. This trend to label policies in this way highlighted a conflict-management perspective to workplace bullying and highlighted the position of the majority of participants in all the focus groups that bullying complaints were largely escalated interpersonal conflicts or personality clashes that be addressed through informal conflict-management approaches rather than formal investigations.

While it has been recommended that organisations have a separate bullying policy from other policies such as discrimination and harassment (UNISON, 1997; Richards & Daly, 2003), the focus groups participating in this study all included bullying, sexual harassment and discrimination within the one policy. While Caponecchia and Wyatt (2009) do not necessarily advocate the need for separate policies, they highlight that if organisations have separate policies; the distinction between these different concepts needs to be made very clear (Caponecchia & Wyatt, 2009). The participants in the focus groups felt that policies that highlighted bullying, harassment and discrimination encouraged employees to frame conflicts as these types of issues. As the definition of bullying is less clear than sexual harassment (where there needs to be unwelcome sexual advances) or discrimination (where specific characteristics such as race, age, sexuality and the like need to be

attacked), bullying is more ambiguous and therefore easily confused with conflict. Therefore, from their perspective, complainants were lodging bullying complaints that were in fact conflict and not bullying.

## **14.2 Bullying as Escalated Conflicts**

Bullying complains were viewed as escalated conflicts by the majority of focus-group participants in all the focus groups. However, one of the concerns in viewing bullying complaints within a conflict-management paradigm is that the occupational health and safety approach to addressing complaints of bullying that assess potential risk factors such as the organisational environment, the social environment of the workplace and perpetrator and target characteristics that contribute to workplace bullying as a hazard is not assessed. While focus-group participants were able to cite the definition of bullying in their policy and complaint procedures, there did not appear to be any initial assessment as to whether the complaints they received were bullying. This initial assessment appeared to be left up to the discretion of the HR practitioner. It appeared a conciliatory approach to resolving the conflicts was taken by most of the focus-group participants. This conciliatory approach has the potential to increase a sense of helplessness felt by the complainant (especially as a high proportion of the HR practitioners in the focus groups appeared to showed a propensity to side with the manager), when complaints of bullying are framed and treated as conflict.

The focus-group participants in all the focus groups all encouraged bully complainants to utilise the informal processes in the complaint procedures. In particular, manager interventions and HR intervention as primary complaint-resolution options where emphasised as the best way to have the issues resolved. The



exception to this was participants from government jurisdictions that specifically managed formal workplace harassment complaints. These participants reported that initial investigations take place of the complaints they receive, however, conciliation is the first step in the complaint resolution process. If a complaint is not resolved at a conciliation conference then a thorough investigation of the matter is undertaken in order to assess whether it is suitable to refer for prosecution. However in the School focus group particularly, it appeared that the preferred way to address the complaint was the HR practitioner directly intervening in the complaint themselves, rather than employing the services of professional mediators. This may reflect the level of training in particular mediation training undertaken by participants.

Many HR practitioners in the focus groups expressed frustration at the complainant's right to choose more formal access points into the conflict-management system, such as having their complaint investigated. All HR professionals who spoke up in the focus groups strongly encouraged complainants *not* to go down this formal path, but to opt for mediation or other conciliatory processes. This again reflects the focus groups' emphasis on framing a bullying complaint as an interpersonal conflict. These findings also support those of Salin (2009), who reported that the organisations in her study predominantly utilised conciliatory measures when responding to workplace bullying and harassment complaints. The tendency to address bullying complaints as conflict may also reflect the conflict-management and mediation training undertaken by most of the participants in the focus groups.

There may be two explanations for why bullying complaints were framed as conflict by the HR professionals in this study. The first is the reported propensity for

employees themselves to label a wide range of behaviours as bullying. Previous studies have suggested that the term *bullying* is used to describe a wide range of behaviours (Branch, 2008) including interpersonal conflicts, dissatisfaction with management and an organisation's processes and policies (Liefoghe & Mackenzie-Davey, 2003). Therefore, employees might utilise bullying complaint procedures to complain about a number of disputes that do not meet the recognised definition of bullying, but perhaps meet some of the criteria, such as a power difference between the target and perpetrator. Therefore, the focus-group participants may be correct in their view that most bullying complaints are not bullying, but conflict-related issues. However, the reluctance of HR practitioners in the focus groups to formally investigate bullying also suggests that some HR practitioners may be reluctant to accept that bullying is occurring within their organisation. This explanation corresponds with the findings of Ferris (2004), where a *hear no evil* strategy was found to be present in a number of organisations. Ferris (2004) reported her experience that workplace bullying complaints are often labelled as personality conflicts by HR professionals, who then take the perspective of the managers involved. In her view, HR professionals see their role as primarily supporting the managers within the organisation. This response has the potential to lead to perceptions of unfairness by complainants who expect that HR will intervene in bullying complaints as outlined in the organisation's bullying and harassment policies and who feel betrayed when they are not addressed as promised.

Addressing conflicts early before they become bullying is recommended (Zapf & Gross, 2001) because it encourages both employees and managers to raise concerns in a constructive way that is more likely to be conducive to problem-

solving strategies (Fox & Stallworth, 2009). However, as one of the focus group participants reported, 'employees do not usually complain to HR about conflicts until they reach the point where they can no longer manage them themselves'. Therefore, it is important that bullying complaints are regarded seriously and assessed in the first instance against the criteria that differentiate bullying from conflict. There did not appear that there were any documented or formal assessment procedures to objectively discriminate between bullying and conflict-related complaints. Furthermore, there were no formal processes to assess the organisational environment for potential risk factors that could contribute to workplace bullying.

### **14.3 Training**

In line with the emphasis on early conflict intervention, all participants in the focus groups recognised the importance of conflict-management training for line managers. However, it appeared that this was not always taken up by managers who were limited by budgetary constraints, or did not see a need for training. However, when made mandatory, participants in the Health Focus Group reported that managers from their organisation who received training reported finding it beneficial. Since poor leadership and failure to address conflicts appropriately before they escalate into bullying have been identified as risk factors in workplace bullying (e.g. Einarsen et al., 1994; Hoel & Cooper, 2000), any training that increases managers' capability to identify and deal with bullying and conflict is crucial (Fox & Stallworth, 2009; Salin, 2008). However, it appeared that there were no HR strategies concerning mandatory conflict-management training for managers as part of the organisation's bullying and harassment prevention workshops. These workshops too, were not mandatory and were held irregularly by the organisations

once or twice a year. Further training was offered to individual managers on an ad hoc basis, and in one organisation, managers had to pay for this training out of their departmental budget. The exception was one organisation represented where training in peer mediation was part of a cultural-change program within the organisation and was mandatory for all managers at that time.

#### **14.4 Follow-up**

Lack of follow-up was viewed as a significant gap in formal bullying and harassment complaint procedures. HR practitioners in the focus groups appeared to follow-up bullying complaints on an as-needed basis and appeared more likely to follow up with the manager rather than the complainant, again suggesting that the perceptions of managers at times receive more credence in bullying allegations than the target or complainant. One participant from the Health Focus Group reported that she might follow-up with a manager if they had built up a 'good relationship', otherwise she would not follow-up. The exception was participants from the Government Focus Group, where although formal follow-up was not stipulated in their policy, all participants reported that they contacted both complainants and respondents as a matter of course in order to see how they were managing after the resolution of a complaint or critical incident. One participant from the SAEOC reported that lack of follow-up and unresolved complaints were the main reasons that complaints were submitted to the EOC.

There may be a number of reasons for lack of follow-up. The range of experiences and abilities in the HR professionals in the study suggests that those with less experience or poor conflict-management skills were concerned about escalating complaints by talking to the complainant, after the complaint had seemingly been

resolved. As one participant said: 'no news is good news', suggesting that if she did not hear from the complainant, then the matter was over and done with (as far as she was concerned). This perspective appeared to be a common view taken by a number of the participants. However, this reluctance to follow-up with complainants has the potential for complainants to feel let down by the HR professional to whom they turn for help, as they may not feel that the matter has been resolved to their satisfaction, or may believe further complaints are worthless. If complainants feel as though their bullying complaint has not been resolved, they may be more likely to seek redress outside the organisation with agencies such as the Safe Work SA, or the SAEOC, as suggested by a participant from that agency who was a member of the Mixed Focus Group.

A lack of follow-up, especially with complainants, may reflect an organisational culture that is typically rule-orientated and bureaucratic (Ferris, 2004) and if a bullying policy and complaint procedure do not prescribe follow-up, then no follow-up is provided. Given that the psychological impact of workplace bullying has been found to be damaging to both the physical and mental health of targets, and the boundaries between who is the target and who is the bully is sometimes blurred, (Tehrani, 2003) the importance of follow-up in the form of debriefing, counselling, conflict-management coaching and ongoing support for both victims and perpetrators of workplace bullying cannot be underestimated.

Overall, the results of focus-group study indicated that HR practitioners endorse a multifaceted approach to address workplace bullying including policies, training and a number of different complaint avenues available for targets to voice their concerns. However, they appeared to place the emphasis on a well-developed

policy, and while acknowledging the different options available to complainants, tended to focus their attention on the complainant–respondent dyad and resolving the matter themselves in an informal way. Furthermore, while all participants recognised workplace bullying was an occupational health and safety concern, no participants referred to the OHSW framework of assessing the workplace environment as possible antecedents to the complaints of bullying they received. The difficulties they had in taking an OHSW approach to bullying has the potential to inadvertently support an environment where bullying is able to thrive under the guise of conflict, insensitive management or sensitive personalities. From a complainant’s perspective, a workplace bullying policy and complaint procedure becomes merely rhetorical when complaints are not treated with the seriousness suggested by the policy statement and complaint procedures. If bullying complaints are viewed as conflict by HR professionals, it is no wonder that some targets that complain about bullying to HR often do no better than those who do not report that they have been bullied or harassed (Adams-Roy & Barling, 1998; Bergman et al., 2002).

#### **14.5 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

There were several limitations to this study. The small number of focus groups make the results of this study difficult to generalise, and as with any group, there were participants within the focus groups who were more vocal than others, thus more weight is given to their opinions. Therefore the inability to draw conclusions and generalise from the information provided is an inherent limitation to a study of this nature. Given the scope of this study, a range of questions about HR practitioners’ experiences and practices in relation to bullying were unable to be explored in any depth and these results reflect the major themes that were discussed

by the vocal group participants, in relation to a limited number of questions raised within the groups.

Another limitation is that the organisations participating in the focus groups were selected on the basis of convenience and a key person in each group was known by the researcher and assisted in recruiting the other focus-group participants. This has the potential to skew results, as all organisations taking part in the study reported having similar policies and a similar approach to addressing workplace bullying. In order to attend to this possible bias, the researcher attempted to recruit groups from a range of agencies including both government and non-government agencies.

However, despite this, these results cannot be generalised to the wider population. As representative samples are associated with considerable financial cost and are also complicated to gather, the more common and cost-effective sampling technique has been to utilise convenience samples in the area of workplace bullying (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2008). However, the results from such convenience sampling cannot be regarded as representative of the views of the wider population, and therefore the findings of this current study cannot be generalised. In line with this, it is recommended that future studies use a more representative sample of HR professionals in order to better understand the wider range of approaches to workplace bullying that organisations and HR practitioners have.

Despite these limitations, this is an important exploratory study that draws attention to the type of responses that some HR professionals have in relation to workplace bullying complaints. Further, the results have drawn attention to the potential gaps in current policy and complaint procedures recognised by the HR

professionals and have identified some of the challenges faced by HR practitioners in preventing and managing workplace bullying.



## **Chapter 15: Bringing the Studies Together: Overall Conclusions and Recommendations**

The studies that made up this thesis examined workplace bullying complaints from three perspectives: that of the complainant (study 1), the alleged perpetrator (study 2) and the HR consultant (study 3) charged with managing complaints of workplace bullying. This chapter outlines the overall conclusions reached by these three studies, with a particular focus on discussing similar findings that arose from within each of the different perspectives. Finally, the implication of these findings is discussed in an applied sense, with recommendations for both future research and workplace bullying policy development.

### **15.1 Many Behaviours, One Concept**

Results from studies 1, 2 and 3 indicated that the term *bullying* is used to describe a range of negative workplace behaviours that occur within a stressful work environment, including one-off conflict situations with both peers and management, unpopular management decisions, conflicts over work performance, as well as repeated negative behaviours that describe acts of (racial, disability or age) discrimination or sexual harassment. The accused bullies too were charged with a variety of behaviours, ranging from being aggressive, ignoring, failure to consult, inappropriate use of humour, sexual harassment and other specific negative or inappropriate behaviours. However, none of the accused bullies perceived their actions as bullying. Many of the accused bullies viewed these behaviours as part of their job as a manager, or as a response to inappropriate behaviours by the complainant. Results also indicated that, at times, both the complainants and accused

bullies were exposed to repeated negative behaviours, but did not view these behaviours as bullying. Most of the focus-group participants in study three reported that the majority of the complaints that they received were labelled bullying, but were in fact conflict situations.

These results highlight the subjective nature of the term *bullying* and support studies that show that employees' interpretation of what bullying is can often differ from the formal definitions (Liefoghe & Mackenzie-Davey, 2001, 2003). There still appears to be considerable confusion as to what workplace bullying is and how it differs from other counterproductive behaviours and conflicts (Branch, 2008). Since researchers and experts in the bullying field cannot agree on a definition of bullying, it is no wonder that employees and HR professionals also have difficulty identifying the phenomenon. However, the results from both studies indicated that the complaints (study 1) and allegations (study 2) all occurred in a highly stressful workplace environment. It may be that within this context employees are more likely to complain about bullying, as this is one way that they can air their grievances within a context that would otherwise not be heard.

Supporting this premise, the HR focus-group participants in study 3 suggested that while current bullying policies and complaint procedures may offer complainants an avenue to have their allegations addressed, they may inadvertently encourage employees to frame conflicts as bullying. They felt that some complainants may have framed conflicts as bullying because there was no other way to have an umpire intervene in the conflict. In light of this, there may be some merit in organisations adopting separate conflict-management policies and complaint procedures and workplace bullying policies and complaint procedures, to manage

this tension. Further research is recommended in order to test the efficacy of parallel policies and complaint processes where staff can have the alternative of having conflicts addressed within a conflict-management paradigm, as an alternative to lodging formal complaints of workplace bullying. Such a policy could actively promote conflict-resolution processes within the organisation, offering Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) practices such as conflict coaching, mediation and group facilitation by professionally trained staff. These processes can be promoted to both staff and managers in order to resolve conflicts before they escalate to the point where they are labelled as bullying. They could also be promoted in a way that encourages managers who are having difficulty managing inappropriate behaviour of employees to receive support through conflict coaching. Having a recognised policy around conflict management may prevent formal complaints of bullying being lodged as a way to gain attention in a conflict situation. This is an area for further research.

## **15.2 The Background of the Bullying Complaints and Allegations**

Both study 1 and study 2 identified similar backgrounds to the bullying allegations. Four distinct antecedents were identified in the first study. These were *target behaviours and characteristics* and *workplace social and industrial environment*. A similar background was identified in study 2, where the alleged bullies justified their behaviour as a response to a stressful industrial environment that contributed to the allegations made against them. The accused bullies also normalised their own inappropriate social and leadership behaviours and blamed the bullying allegation on complainant characteristics or over-reactions. These antecedents to the bullying allegations did not appear to be a priority for the focus-

group participants in study 3, where the HR practitioners tended to focus their attention on the complainant–respondent dyad.

The background to the bullying, identified in these exploratory studies, supports more representative research that suggests workplace bullying occurs in a stressful environment (Hauge, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2009; Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2007, Avergold, 2009), where poor job design and ambiguous roles (Einarsen, Raknes & Matthiesen, 1994; Leyman, 1996) and lack of control over the work do (Einarsen et al., 1994) contribute to high levels of conflict, and ultimately bullying. Similarly, studies have indicated that an inappropriate social environment can also contribute to group behaviours that lead to workplace bullying (Hoel & Salin, 2003). This occurs when targets challenge group norms and are stigmatised for being different from the dominant social group (Lewin & Peterson, 1999; Leymann, 1996). While most studies reporting stressful environments have utilised the target's perspective, results of study 2 in this thesis found that the accused perpetrators also blamed these environmental and situational factors for their own behaviours. The accused bullies in study 2 viewed environmental factors such as poor staffing levels, ambiguous roles and poor performance from staff as the main reasons they were accused of bullying. They viewed their own behaviours, such as inappropriate use of humour, authoritarian management styles or promoting a sexualised workplace as normal, or justifiable, and the complainant's response as over-reacting. They also justified their own aggressive behaviours as defending one's self against inappropriate behaviours carried out by the complainant.

In contrast with the accused bullies' perspective, a number of the complainants in study one reported being bullied as a result of personal

characteristics that violated the norms of the dominant social group, such as having a disability and requiring additional assistance, being of a different sexuality or coming from a different culture from the dominant group. Similarly, complainant characteristics interacted with the stressful industrial environment and in study 1, a complainant described blowing the whistle on organisational practices that she believed to be illegal. Other participants in this study described high levels of conflict, job insecurity due to changes in the industrial legalisation, ambiguous job roles and recent changes in job description and tasks. Similar industrial backgrounds and inappropriate social work environments were described by the accused bullies in study 2.

However, the boundary between the bullies and the targets was often blurred, with some complainants in study 1 identified as provoking the conflict and in study 2 some alleged bullies reporting that they were targets of bullying. This result supports studies that show that being a target of workplace bullying, regardless of the frequency of the behaviour, is predicative of bullying others (Hauge, Skogstad & Einarsen, 2009) and that it is often difficult to tell who the targets are and who the bullies are (Tehrani, 2003).

In light of this finding, it was interesting to note that neither the complainants in study 1, nor the alleged perpetrators in study 2 had any insight that their own behaviours, including retaliatory behaviours, may have contributed to the escalation of conflicts or to the allegations made against them. This lack of acknowledgement supports Zapf's (1999) finding that targets often have little insight into how their own behaviours may have contributed to the bullying. While Zapf's (1999) study related to *targets* of workplace bullying, similar results were found in study 2 in the

present thesis, where the alleged bullies also appeared to have little insight into how their own behaviours could have contributed to the allegations against them. Rather, they both blamed the other for the conflict, and also blamed the wider organisational environment. These results can be explained through attribution theory (see Heider, 1958, Kelly, 1973 and Weiner, 1986) which suggests that both bully targets and perpetrators have need to understand the causes of the situations in which they find themselves, and will rationalise their responses (and the responses of others) based on how they interpret external information through their internal belief systems. Both bully targets and perpetrators make attributions about their own behaviour (intrapersonal attributions) and attributions about the others behaviours (interpersonal). Therefore the way that both targets and perpetrators understand and seek to control their environment may be explained from within an attributional framework, and this may be an under researched area in workplace bullying research. Given the applied nature of the current research, a discussion of the results within an attribution framework is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, it may be useful for further studies to provide an attributional explanation of workplace bullying from both the targets perspective, and that of the bullies.

The stressful industrial and organisational social backgrounds described by participants in studies 1 and 2 of this thesis and highlighted as an important antecedent to workplace bullying in a number of studies (see Hoel & Salin, 2003 for a review of these studies), was not taken into account by the HR professionals in study 3. When discussing how they managed bullying complaints, the HR professionals focused on the complainant–alleged perpetrator dyad and adopted a conflict-management approach to resolving bullying complaints. This approach does

not take into account the wider antecedents that have contributed to the bullying allegation and the OHSW approach that has been recommended to address bullying by a number of studies (Dollard & Knott, 2004; Caponecchia & Wyatt, 2007). It may be that some of the issues identified in the first two studies in this thesis such as the impact of industrial laws, inadequate staffing, ambiguous job descriptions and conflicts arising out of organisational restructuring, are beyond the control of the HR consultant and therefore are not attended to when HR professionals address bullying complainants. Most of the HR consultants in the study had undertaken some type of conflict-management training and therefore when receiving a complaint of bullying, focused their attention on the conflict, rather than more systemic issues that may have contributed to the complaint. Given that the results of the first two studies in this thesis suggest being accused of workplace bullying and complaining of workplace bullying are significantly related to *both* exposure to bullying and experiencing a stressful work environment, measures to address the environmental factors as well as the bullying allegations themselves need to be taken into account. This means a focus on improving the workplace environment, as well as addressing the issues between the perpetrator and complainant. If these stressful environmental factors are not taken into account, then employees and managers returning to similar environments will be more likely be involved in conflict situations that can escalate into further complaints of workplace bullying. HR practitioners may benefit from education that focuses on the systemic issues and environmental factors that contribute to bullying, and strategies to address bullying from the OHSW risk-management perspective, in contrast to the conflict-management approach that appears to be currently favoured. However, further studies may be warranted to

better understand the practical barriers faced by HR professionals in addressing bullying from this more systemic perspective.

### **15.3 Perceptions of Injustice**

Perceptions of injustice were dominant themes in both study 1 and study 2. As well as the complainants and the alleged bullies believing that the initial behaviours they were exposed to were unfair, there were strong feelings of injustice in relation to the way the complaint of workplace bullying was managed by the organisation, both from the complainant's perspective and that of the alleged perpetrator. While bullying is conceptualised in the literature as persistent exposure to negative behaviour, the results of these studies suggest that fairness and justice are central to the perception of bullying, whether the behaviour is persistent or not. One-off situations or discrete conflicts that were perceived as unfair or unjust were interpreted as workplace bullying in the complainants' study, and both complainants and perpetrators reported that they felt bullied by the complaint processes that they felt was unfair. In these cases, the focus of the bullying widened to incorporate the actions of the organisational representatives who became part of the problem.

The propensity of some HR personnel to frame bullying complaints as interpersonal conflict may heighten a sense of injustice for a complainant who feels disempowered not only by the initial behaviour, but now also by the complaint process. The results of study 3 indicated that often the HR personnel would side with the manager and frame the complaint as conflict between a subordinate and the manager. Follow-up after the resolution of a complaint would occur with the manager, in preference to the complainant, who was viewed as the problem by some of the focus-group participants. While these results cannot be generalised, they do



support other studies where a common organisational response to workplace bullying is one where the bullying is often framed as personality conflicts or poor management (Zapf & Gross, 2001; Ferris, 2004; Marshall, 2005) and where reconciliatory approaches to workplace bullying complaints are the most common approaches (Salin, 2008) by HR professionals. Framing bullying complaints as insensitive management or personality conflicts may exacerbate perceptions of unfairness from complainants, who already view the perpetrator's actions as unreasonable and aggressive. One of the consequences of this was that complainants (in study 1) and alleged perpetrators (in study 2) who believe they had been treated unfairly during the grievance process sought alternative remedies in the form of submitting a worker's compensation claim (Sixty three percent of complainants in study 1 submitted a workers compensation claim), seeking legal redress and eventually exiting the organisation (twenty five percent of alleged perpetrators in study 2, left the organisation and ten percent were in the process of, or had sued their employer). These results support other studies that have found that perceptions of injustice and blame are positively related to revenge behaviours and other CWBs (Aquino et al., 2001, 2006; Folger & Cropanzano, 1998; Greenberg, 1993; Greenberg & Alge, 1998; Skarlicki & Folger, 1997). They also support studies that have indicated that perceptions of a poor response by an organisation to a workplace injury contribute to employees filing workers' compensation claims (Dollard & Knott, 2004; Haines et al., 2004), as do negative perceptions of organisational justice (Winefeild et al., 2010). However, the results of the current study are unique, because they indicate that the way an organisation manages a workplace bullying

complaint may have significant consequences in terms of the decision of bullied targets to file workers' compensation stress claims.

The accused bullies' perception of injustice appeared to be particularly related to the way in which complaints against them were lodged, the lack of support during the complaint process and the lack of follow-up following the investigation or termination of the complaint—something that has been recommended as important for both bully victims and perpetrators (Tehrani, 2003). Many participants in study 2 described biased complaint processes and others described a sense of injustice at the severity of the punishment handed down to them. Many reported not being informed of the specific allegations and having to pursue what they believed to be a fair hearing through legal channels. Unlike the complainants in the first study who appeared to want an investigation of their complaint, the alleged perpetrators in study 2 felt that investigating the complaint against them was heavy handed, and many reported wanting a conciliatory approach in the first instance. As previously discussed, the focus-group participants in the third study did not take either of these approaches, but appeared to intervene on a personal level, carrying out informal mediation/negotiations between parties, but were reluctant to have a formal mediation process or an investigation undertaken. While it may not be possible to completely satisfy all parties involved in a complaint process, these results highlight the importance of providing a framework in which both complainants and alleged perpetrators can have an opportunity to take part in a transparent and fair process, where their views are listened to and taken into account. The dissatisfaction expressed by both complainants and alleged perpetrators in study 1 and study 2, reflect their lack of opportunity to have the complaint resolved through a fair and

transparent process. These results support studies where the importance of identified dispute resolutions systems are adhered to in bullying complaint management processes (Fox & Stallworth, 2009). To ensure a fair outcome, it is imperative that a transparent process is carried out where both parties are able to provide their perspective on the allegation and the preferred outcome. Taking into account the blurred boundary between victim and perpetrator, it is also important that the mental health needs and ongoing concerns of *both* parties are addressed and followed up after complaint resolution is reached.

To the author's knowledge, the contribution of following up the perceptions of justice in relation to complaint resolution has not been previously examined by the literature. Unresolved needs following initial complaint resolution, and ongoing conflicts contributed to an increased sense of injustice for the participants in both study 1 and study 2. The unresolved issues described by the participants' in both studies, appeared to exacerbate the sense of unfairness felt by both the complainants' and the accused bullies. Participants in both studies described actively pursuing their ongoing concerns and in some cases taking retaliatory actions against the organisation or key personnel they believed responsible for unfair decisions or actions. Therefore, while follow-up has been recommended in relation to mental health of both complainants and perpetrators (Terhani, 2003), it is thought to be an important component of justice that may not have been previously examined in relation to complaint resolution. Further research in this area is warranted, as follow-up may be an important component of either procedural justice or interactional justice perceptions and may influence the perception of the complaint outcome (i.e. perceptions of distributive justice).

## 15.4 Mental Health

Results of both Study 1 and study 2 indicated that severe mental health problems were common among both complainants and perpetrators. However, this is the first study known to the author to identify the mental health repercussions of being accused of workplace bullying. While the cross sectional nature of these studies prevents the suggestion of a causal pathway, the negative psychological impact of bullying is supported by other studies that report a significant source of stress and anxiety with severe mental health consequences in targets (Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2003; Hoel et al., 2004; Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2004; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002; Tehrani, 2004). Bullying is considered an occupational health and safety issue (Caponecchia & Wyatt, 2007, 2009; Dollard and Knott, 2004) because of these potential health ramifications. As well the detrimental psychological effects of workplace bullying reported in study 1, study 2 found that the psychological effects of being labelled a bully were just as severe.

The severe mental health concerns reported by participants in both study 1 and study 2 can also be explained in relation to perceptions of *injustice*. Results of both study 1 and study 2 showed significant positive relationships between *perceptions of injustice* and participants scores on the *depression* and *anxiety* subscales, indicating that the higher the *perception of injustice*, the greater *depression*, *anxiety* and general *stress* reported. While no causal interpretation can be made with cross-sectional results such as these, they do support studies where perceptions of organisational injustice are related to a range of negative psychological outcomes (Elovainio et al., 2002; Tepper, 2001). Furthermore, when

the interview data is examined, participants themselves have linked their *perception of unfairness* with their mental health concerns.

The severe mental health concerns reported by both complainants and accused perpetrators further highlight the blurred boundary between victim and perpetrator and suggest that perpetrators as well as targets require ongoing support and follow-up throughout any bullying investigation or intervention.

## **15.5 Upward Bullying**

Sixty-six per cent of participants in study 2 reported that they had been ever been bullied over the previous 12 months, with 24 per cent of these managers reporting bullying at least on a monthly basis, if not more frequently. Furthermore, the descriptions of upward bullying given by a number of participants in study 2, and the revenge behaviours and other inappropriate behaviours reported as being carried out by some of the complainants in study 1 also suggests that managers may be targets of bullying from subordinates, but may be less likely to report they are being bullied than subordinates in similar positions. Participants in study 2 reported being uncomfortable with complaining about being bullied by their staff and many reported that managing inappropriate behaviour or bullying was part of their job. Some participants talked about bullying tactics being used by groups of staff to resist changes and unpopular management decisions. Quantitative results from study 2 indicated that 40 per cent of managers reported that they were bullied by subordinates (as compared to colleagues or supervisors) and the main types of bullying behaviours reported were personal attacks as opposed to work-related attacks. This may be a reflection of the types of bullying behaviours that subordinates can get away with (such as spreading rumours or gossip, or ignoring

behaviours) as opposed to behaviours that may reflect on their own performance (such as withholding information from their manager), or behaviours they are unable to carry out against someone in a senior position to themselves (such as excessively monitoring work or removing key areas of responsibility).

The use of bullying tactics by staff against managers has several implications in terms of mental health and burnout in managers who may be attempting to deal with subordinates who are bullying them. Combined with the high degree of emotional regulation reported by the participants in study 2, dealing with the stress of being bullied and the suppressing of negative emotions may contribute to additional psychological distress in terms of emotional exhaustion for the managers involved. Whereas employees are able to utilise complaint procedures and employee-assistance programs to express their frustrations and negative emotions, it appears that there are few avenues that managers feel comfortable in accessing. The regulation and suppression of negative emotions may be particularly problematic given the perception that admitting to being bullied, let alone admitting that you *may be* a bully, may be confronting for some managers. Further research is needed to investigate the impact of emotional regulation and suppression in managers who have both been accused of bullying and who may be the targets of *upward bullying*.

Upward bullying is an underexplored area in workplace bullying research (Branch, Ramsey & Barker, 2008), even though the results of European research suggest that between 2 and 27 per cent of managers are bullied by their subordinates at some time (Zapf et al., 2003). However, the research that specifically examines the experiences and impacts of upward bullying is scarce. The omission of managers from a number of studies into workplace bullying may contribute to the perception

that bullying is mainly carried out by managers against their subordinates (Hoel et al., 2001). However, results of study 2 in the current thesis suggest that a high proportion of participants (all who were in managerial positions) considered that they were victims of workplace bullying. It is therefore important for future studies to more closely examine upward bullying, to help identify the circumstances in which this might occur and the effects of upward bullying on management decision making and career longevity. Managers, who depend on their staff to cooperate with direction during times of change, or in particularly stressful environments, may be especially vulnerable to bullying from workers who resist change, withhold information and expertise and engage in both passive-resistant behaviour as well as overt inappropriate behaviours.

By further investigating upward bullying, we may come to a better understanding of the complexity of the phenomenon and also contribute to the development of better workplace policies and complaint processes that take into account the existence of upward bullying.

## **15.6 Lack of Follow-up**

The lack of follow-up and support described by many of the participants in study 1 and study 2 was also highlighted in the HR focus-group study as a gap in workplace bullying and harassment complaint processes. Results from the focus-group study indicated that in most of the organisations represented, following up a complaint of workplace bullying after it had seemingly been resolved was undertaken on a discretionary basis, usually by the more experienced HR personnel. Some HR Personnel in the focus groups appeared to hold the perspective that no

news is good news', and therefore a complaint would only be followed up if one of the parties (in particular the accused manager) requested further intervention.

Lack of follow-up was particularly noted as a problem by the participants in study 2. A number of participants talked about while they may have been found not guilty of the allegations against them, they would have liked to have had more formal debriefing, or an opportunity to discuss how their behaviour may have contributed to the complaint, including extra support moving forward following an allegation against them. Costantino and Merchant (1996) highlight the importance of feedback as being important in any conflict-management system, but it appears that the opportunity for participants in the current studies to provide feedback in relation to both the management of the complaint, or indeed receive feedback regarding their own behaviour, was not provided. Just as failure to address the organisational antecedents of bullying may contribute to the bullying reoccurring in a stressful workplace environment, lack of feedback and coaching for both complainants and perpetrators means that when they return to the workplace they may continue to carrying out behaviours perceived by others as either provocative or bullying.

Further research is recommended in order to ascertain whether an addition to current complaint processes that include mandatory follow-up and debriefing, including conflict coaching following the resolution of a complaint, results in the parties perceiving greater support from the organisation, a greater sense of fairness in relation to the process and outcome and a change in behaviour.



## **15.7 Limitations of the Current Research and Future Challenges**

A major challenge in research into workplace bullying, and in particular researching bully complainants and perpetrators, is the difficulty in obtaining representative samples and therefore the ability to generalise the results. As the studies in this thesis were designed to be in-depth exploratory studies, their descriptive nature and utilisation of convenience sampling means that results cannot be generalised. However, convenience sampling has been recommended for examining phenomenological aspects of workplace bullying (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2008). Therefore, in exploring what happens when employees complain about bullying, and as one of the first studies to examine bullying from the perpetrators' perspective, the approach and convenience sampling utilised in the studies in this thesis is legitimate. However, a more empirical approach with representative sampling of workplace targets and bullies is recommended for future studies.

As the data in all the studies in this thesis were obtained through self-report and interviews, biases and social desirability may be a problem. It is probable that participants gave answers and told their story in the interviews in a manner that cast them in a favourable light. In terms of the complainants, it is probable that they minimised their own behaviours that contributed to or escalated the bullying and highlighted the perpetrator's and the organisation's negative responses. In terms of the perpetrators, it is likely they justified and minimised their own inappropriate behaviours, highlighting and drawing attention to the complainant's poor behaviours. It is acknowledged that the small number of focus groups make the results of the focus group study difficult to generalise, and as with any group, there were participants within the focus groups who were more vocal than others, thus more

weight is given to their opinions. Therefore the inability to draw conclusions and generalise from the information provided in the focus groups is an inherent limitation to a study of this nature. However, given the exploratory nature of the studies presented in this thesis, the perceptions of all participants from each of the studies are all valid in terms of describing their subjective experiences in relation to workplace bullying and bullying complaint processes.

As previously discussed, one of the limitations of the studies within this thesis is that no inter-rater reliability cross checks of the coding was performed and therefore it is possible the emergent codes and the development of the codes and the themes may have been interpreted in a different manner or labelled another way by a different analyst.

### **15.7.1 Conclusions**

Despite the methodological limitations outlined above, these studies confirm many of the facets of workplace bullying described in more representative research, in particular the importance of workplace climate (Einarsen et al., 1994; Salin, 2003; Vartia, 1996; Zapf, 1999; Zapf et al., 1996) and social culture (Hoel & Salin, 2003) as antecedents in workplace bullying and the importance of justice in successful resolution of bullying complaints. The results of these exploratory studies lay the groundwork for more empirical and longitudinal research into the impact that perceptions of injustice have on workplace bullying allegations from the perspective of the complainant, the bully and the HR professional charged with managing the complaint. The applied results of these studies also suggest additions to current bullying policies and complaint procedures that incorporate parallel ADR processes, such as conflict coaching and mediation, to deal with conflict before it becomes

framed as bullying. These studies also identified difficulties HR professionals have in examining bullying from an OHSW perspective, in particular, in addressing the workplace environmental risks associated with bullying. Rather, they focused on the complainant-respondent dyad to the exclusion of more systemic factors. The lack of follow-up after complaint resolution was also found to compound the perceptions of injustice reported by a number of the complainants and alleged perpetrators. Finally, these studies should be regarded as a break in the long tradition of primarily listening to the target's point of views in workplace bullying research and support the call for more research that addresses the perspectives of all the stakeholders.

## **Appendix A: Letter of Invitation Sent to WorkCover Clients**

Dear Sir/Madam

This letter has been sent to you by WorkCover on behalf of Moira Jenkins, a PhD student at Adelaide University. She does not have your name or any of your contact details.

Moira is inviting you to take part in a research project that is being undertaken through the School of Psychology at the University of Adelaide.

Moira is interested in how organisations respond to complaints of inappropriate behaviour such as bullying and harassment. It is hoped that the results of this study will help organisations better manage workplace conflicts and perhaps prevent subsequent problems for people who make complaints at work about this type of behaviour.

Moira is hoping to talk with you about your experiences after you complained about inappropriate workplace behaviour, and if you did, why you lodged a worker's compensation claim. She is interested in what happened after you made a complaint at work, and what aspects of the complaint process were helpful and what aspects were not helpful in resolving your complaint. She hopes to find out whether current complaint mechanisms added to your problem, or helped resolve the problem. If you have not used available complaint mechanisms in your workplace, she is interested in why this is so.

This discussion will probably take about 45 minutes. You are able to talk to her over the telephone if you wish. With your permission she will tape the conversation. She will transcribe the tapes, and to maintain your confidentiality she will delete any identifying information about you and your department when

she types up the transcript. She will then destroy the tape. If you want a copy of the transcript you may request it.

Moira is also requesting that you fill out a survey, which should take about 20 minutes to complete. In order that your answers remain confidential:

- You do not need to put your name on any of the survey items;
- You and your organisation will not be identified in any way in the final results of the study;
- Your employer, WorkCover, and your claims' agent will not know that you have agreed to take part in this study.

This study has been approved by the University of Adelaide Ethics Committee, and if you have any questions, you can telephone me on 8303 3122 or refer to the attached independent complaint form if you have any complaints about the way the project is being conducted. You can withdraw from the study at any time.

After completing the survey and interview, Moira will give you a booklet containing information about support groups in South Australia, and other services that may be of assistance in relation to inappropriate workplace behaviours.

If you wish to take part in the study please telephone Moira on 8242 5165 in order to give her your contact details so that she can arrange a convenient time and place for a discussion about your experiences. This discussion can take place over the telephone if you would prefer. Additionally, if you have any other questions please feel free to telephone her.

Yours Sincerely

Associate Professor Helen Winefield

Department of Psychology

# Appendix B: Media Releases for the Complainants' and the Bullies' Studies



## **MEDIA RELEASE**

MARKETING & STRATEGIC  
COMMUNICATIONS  
UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE SA 5005  
AUSTRALIA  
TELEPHONE +61 8 8303 5174  
FACSIMILE +61 8 8303 4629

### **DOES COMPLAINING ABOUT WORKPLACE BULLYING HELP?**

New research in the University of Adelaide's School of Psychology aims to help organisations better manage complaints of workplace bullying.

PhD student Moira Jenkins is carrying out a study to see whether current complaint processes for addressing bullying in the workplace improve the situation or make it worse. She wants to find out what works successfully and what is going wrong when complaints aren't resolved.

"Most organisations now have bullying and harassment policies and complaint processes aimed at preventing and dealing with inappropriate behaviours like bullying. However evidence suggests that many employees who are bullied don't use these processes because either they are not confident it will help, or they are fearful of making things worse," said Ms Jenkins.

"In support of this, there have been a number of studies that suggest that targets of bullying who report the behaviour do no better than those who keep quiet, and in some cases they even do worse."

Ms Jenkins is looking for volunteers who have made a complaint about workplace bullying over the past year. She will interview them about the outcome of their complaint and their perceptions of the processes involved in resolving the complaint. Participants will also be asked to fill out a short survey. Confidentiality is guaranteed and nothing will identify individuals or workplaces.

"Despite bullying being recognised as a serious problem, we still don't have a good idea of what goes on in organisations when people do make a complaint. We don't know what aspects of the complaint procedures are helpful, and what aspects are not helpful" she said.

"I hope that the results of this study will help organisations better manage workplace conflicts and perhaps prevent subsequent problems for people who make complaints at work about this type of behaviour."

People interested in taking part in the study should contact Moira Jenkins by phoning 0412 733 453 or emailing [moira.jenkins@adelaide.edu.au](mailto:moira.jenkins@adelaide.edu.au).

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#### **MEDIA CONTACT:**

Moira Jenkins, School of Psychology, University of Adelaide, Mob: 0412 733 453

Robyn Mills, Media and Corporate Communications Officer, University of Adelaide, Tel: (08) 8303 6341, Mob: 0410 689 084

# Media Release

[www.adelaide.edu.au/news](http://www.adelaide.edu.au/news)



Thursday 25 September 2008

## New study seeks managers accused of workplace bullying

New research in the University of Adelaide's School of Psychology will examine what happens to managers who have been accused of workplace bullying by their staff.

PhD student Moira Jenkins who is also a registered Psychologist, is carrying out a study of managers who have been accused of bullying by their workers, and how they are affected by such accusations.

"Most organisations now have bullying and harassment policies and complaint processes aimed at dealing with inappropriate behaviours such as bullying and harassment. However evidence suggests that some employees use these complaint procedures to complain about all sorts of workplace conflict, and behaviours that are not necessarily bullying" said Ms Jenkins.

"There are very few studies that have examined how complaints affect the people who have been accused of being a bully, especially managers who often have to keep managing the team while they are under investigation for workplace bullying."

Ms Jenkins is looking for managers who have had a complaint of workplace bullying made against them in the past year to hear their perspective on the accusations, the way the complaint was addressed, how the complaint affected their ability to carry out their job and the support they received. Study participants will be interviewed and asked to fill out a short survey.

"I hope that the results of this study will help organisations better manage workplace conflicts before they become complaints of bullying," said Ms Jenkins. "Hopefully it will also give some guidance on how to best support managers who have allegations made against them."

Interviewee confidentiality is guaranteed and nothing will identify individuals or workplaces. People interested in taking part in the study should contact Moira Jenkins by phoning 0412 733 453 or emailing [moira.jenkins@adelaide.edu.au](mailto:moira.jenkins@adelaide.edu.au).

*Media Contact:*

**Moira Jenkins**  
School of Psychology  
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## Appendix C: Confirmation of Ethics Approval for the Complainants' Study, the Bullies' Study and the Focus-Group Study



OFFICE OF THE DEPUTY VICE-CHANCELLOR (RESEARCH)

SABINE SCHREIBER  
SECRETARY  
HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

THE UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE  
SA 5005  
AUSTRALIA

TELEPHONE +61 8 8303 6028  
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email: sabine.schreiber@adelaide.edu.au  
CRICOS Provider Number 00123M

Applicant: Associate Professor HR Winefield

Department: Psychology

Project Title: *Perceptions of organisational justice as a factor in psychological injury claims - an exploratory study*

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THE UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

**Project No:** H-006-2006 **RM No:** 0000006793

APPROVED for the period until: 31 March 2007

subject to minor modification to the letters of introduction. It is noted that this study involves Ms Moira Jenkins, PhD candidate.

Refer also to the accompanying letter setting out requirements applying to approval.

  
Associate Professor Garrett Cullity  
Convenor  
Human Research Ethics Committee

Date: 15 MAR 2006





THE UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE AUSTRALIA

School of Psychology

The University of Adelaide  
Adelaide, South Australia, 5005  
Telephone + 61 8 8303 5693  
FAX: + 61 8 8303 3770

Human Research Ethics Subcommittee

Approval sheet

Date: 19/5/08

Dear HELEN

The members of the subcommittee have considered your application:

Code Number: 08/51 ( WORKPLACE BULLIES )

With [Student Name, if applicable]: MOSRA JENKINS

I am writing to confirm that approval has been granted for this project to proceed.

Yours sincerely,



Dr. Paul Delfabbro  
Acting Convener of the Human Research Ethics Subcommittee  
School of Psychology  
Ph. 8 303 5744  
[Paul.delfabbro@psychology.adelaide.edu.au](mailto:Paul.delfabbro@psychology.adelaide.edu.au)



School of Psychology  
The University of Adelaide  
Adelaide, South Australia, 5005  
Telephone + 61 8 8303 5693  
FAX: + 61 8 8303 3770

Human Research Ethics Subcommittee

Approval sheet

Date: 5/6/09

Dear Helen

The members of the subcommittee have considered your application:

Code Number: 09/70 [ADDRESSING WORKPLACE BULLYING]

With [Student Name, if applicable]: MOIRA JENKINS

I am writing to confirm that approval has been granted for this project to proceed.

Yours sincerely,

[Redacted Signature]

Dr. Paul Delfabbro  
Acting Convener of the Human Research Ethics Subcommittee  
School of Psychology  
Ph. 8 303 5744 x576  
[Paul.delfabbro@psychology.adelaide.edu.au](mailto:Paul.delfabbro@psychology.adelaide.edu.au)

## Appendix D: Interview Guides Used for the Complainants' and Bullies' Studies

### Complainants' Study: Interview Guide

Can you please tell me what happened at work that lead to you putting in a bullying complaint?

1. How did you make your complaint—verbally, in writing, who to?
  - a. How did the behaviour affect you? (*follow-up with in what way.. how...*)
2. What happened after you made your complaint?
3. Tell me about the complaint process?
  - a. How long it was before your complaint was addressed?
  - b. How did the organisation address the allegations? (*Mediation, investigation, ....*)
  - c. Did you think you were supported by the organisation or not? (*In what way?*)
  - d. Where did you get your support from?
4. Did you lodge a Workers Compensation claim? (*if so why?*)
5. Can you talk about the process of lodging a worker's compensation claim?
6. Are you still working or the organisation?
  - a. *If no: Why not?*
  - b. *If yes: What is that like?*

## **Bullies' Study: Interview Guide**

1. Can you tell me a little about your job and the place where you work/worked?
  - a. What were the main stressors?
  - b. What was your role? Did you enjoy it? What was the most difficult part of your role?
2. How did you come to be accused of bullying?
  - a. Describe the background of the complaint?
  - b. What was your relationship with the complainant
  - c. Have you had allegations made against you in the past?
3. What happened after the allegation was made?
4. How did you cope with the allegations?
  - a. Who were your main supports home /work
  - b. What was the most difficult thing about the investigation?
  - c. Do you think the investigation was conducted in a fair manner, if not why not?
5. What were the consequences of the complaint for you?
  - d. Repercussions?
  - e. Disciplinary action?
  - f. Career?
6. Is there anything that would have made the (complaint) process easier for you?

**Appendix E: Initial Codes Identified in the Complainants' Study,  
Including Diary Notes and Personal Reflections of the Coding  
Process**

<b>Initial Codes</b>	<b>Notes/Interesting categories within code. Personal reflections</b>	<b>Number of participants identifying this code (note code can be identified more than once within a paragraph or transcript.)</b>
Responsibility (participant somehow responsible for conflict starting)	Participants seemed to have little insight as to how their own behaviour may have started or escalated the conflict. All labelled this as bullying, even though it was clear in most of the interviews that it began as 'conflict' but escalated from there. Does the label of bullying frame the conflict in a certain way? Is this what the research terms <i>provocative victims</i> ?	5
Performance management	Much of the escalation of the conflict was because of perceptions of poor performance-management practices. However, this was still called bullying by participants. No insight!	15
Whistle-blower	No insight as to how this may cause retaliation or victimisation from workmates. Unfairness.	3
Mobbing	(Related to whistle blowing—group victimisation/retaliation). Unfairness	2
Psychopath		1
One person started	Initial conflict btw two people that escalated and framed as bullying. Unfairness	18
Labelled as bully by the perpetrator	Respondent to bullying complaint, now becomes victim. Unfairness	2
Harassment or discrimination	Race, disability	7
Threats of dismissal		4
	Work choices/ability to more easily sack worker used as a threat	2
	Short-term contracts made people too scared to complain	2
Past claim for physical injury	Was this discrimination or employer annoyed with past behaviour? One person had a number of claims for physical injuries before the 'bullying' started.	2
Employer perpetrator	Small, family-owned business	4
Known by management to be a problem already	Not right	12
Talked to HR/Contact officer	What can they do—Very process driven—referred to policy and grievance procedure.	12
Verbal complaint to manager		13

Manager frightened of bully		4
Manager inexperienced so no help		5
No one to talk to about the conflict		5
Union	Helpful	5
	Not helpful	2
EAP/staff counsellor	No reporting or feedback to organisation—seen as a problem by many.	9
Investigation	Not helpful	7
	Time problems	2
Mediation	Not helpful	10
Policy and procedures	Never used	4
	Used well	1
	Process not followed	17
	Too difficult to use	4
	Timeframes too long	2
Formal written complaint		12
	Didn't want to use	3
	Nothing to lose	1
	Decided not to/too hard	3
Support from organisation	Positive	1
	Negative	14
Public sector safe (can't get fired)		2
Organisation bully		10
Mental health deteriorating	All participants had seen or were seeing a psychiatrist and or psychologist in relation to their mental health. All contributed the deterioration in health to workplace bullying. Unfairness	32
Illegal revenge seeking	Threatened to shoot or hurt management team (Interesting this wasn't just the single perpetrator). One had a restraining order against her however, no insight into her own aggressive behaviour.	3
No debriefing afterwards	Even when things had been resolved. What does resolved mean for the ©	3
Leave (stress, sick, annual, resign)	All had leave of sorts. WorkCover was last resort for a few.	32
Feeling displaced	When transferred to another section or part of the organisation. Feeling punished/not fair (this unfairness kept coming up all the time).	3
	Options	2
WorkCover/outside agency	EOC/HREOC/Lawyer	32
	Initially Couldn't/wouldn't	3
	Dilemma	1
	Fight for claim	7
	No choice/last resort	16
Fairness	Fight to prove self as true	5
	Need to get justice	4
	Treatment	6
	Issues swept under carpet	7
	Interpersonal fairness	9
	Allowed to get away with it	16
	No trust	5
No choice last resort		18

## Appendix F: Initial Codes Identified in the Bullies' Study, Including Diary Notes and Personal Reflections Made during the Coding Process

Organised Groups	Initial Codes	Notes/Interesting categories within code/shared meanings/questions. Personal reflections
An	Previous complaints against the respondent (participant)	Was able to justify behaviour. Three formal complaints. Not found guilty but history of staff complaining. What does this mean?
An	History of conflict between parties	All participants reported that the complaint come out of the blue and was unexpected, but then reported a history of conflict including conflict over performance and 'personality conflicts' between themselves and the complainant
An	Performance management	This appeared to be a really big issue for a lot of participants. Links in with participants justifying behaviour as them trying to manage poor performance
An	Came out of the blue	Despite conflict history—linked with surprise
An	Mental health issues (complainant)	Linking with poor behaviour
An	Complainants behaviour viewed as bullying	? upward bullying
An/C	Complainant describing dissatisfaction with broader industrial and organisational issues	In some of the complaints the complainant complained not only about the participant's behaviour, but also broader organisational issues, policies and processes that were not personal.— Links in with employee accounts of bullying
An	Complainant and respondent in previous personal relationship	Allegations also of DV
An	New manager bringing about organisational changes	Bought into the position to bring about change. Reported that the complaint/s were a result of them trying to implement change, including restructuring, or managing performance when this hadn't been done for a while
An	Organisational culture	Participants talked about long standing conflict within the organisation, over work, poor moral, inappropriate behaviours.
An	Social culture of department	Promoting a 'pub environment,' Use of inappropriate humour. Both linked with characteristics of perp.
An	Industrial problems	Staffing problems, high workload, role ambiguity
C An	Group complaint	One person leading the group. Three complaints to submit a group complaint. In one case two of the complaints withdrew their complaint part way through the investigation (neither complaint substantiated). New manager at the time, org changes
C,E	Respondent (participant) reporting feeling ganged up on	
C	Complainant was a new employee	
C,E	Respondent (participant) reporting they were being bullied	A number of participants talked about upward bullying and believed the complaint against them was a form of bullying
C	Malicious complaint	

C	Splitting of staff loyalties	
E	Participant reporting they are over sensitive	Talked about holding back tears at work, not wanting to show emotion to staff or management. Showing emotion was considered weak, or unprofessional
E	Suicidal ideation following complaint	Both male respondents (participants) one investigated and one summarily dismissed (no investigation, unfair dismissal legal case pending). 1 female, no support at work. Lots of conflict
E	Anxiety, Depression, PTSD, high levels of emotion expressed, anger	All participants described a significant emotional reaction to the allegations and ongoing psychological consequences.
E	Participant (respondent) reporting that they don't want manager to think they are not coping..	So not asking for assistance or denying emotional response, as may affect their career prospects
E	Shocked, no previous complaints	Long work history. No previous complaints
E	'Gob-smacked', out of the blue	
E/J	Surprise/no idea	Despite history of conflict most were surprised at a complainant against them
E An	Minimising their behaviour/no insight	Provided documentation that suggested gross sexual harassment and inappropriate behaviours but respondent (participant) showing little or no awareness about the issues involved)
J	Justifying behaviour as normal	Also reported they would do it differently next time
J	Complainants behaviour as bullying	A strong theme with most participants
E	Poor coping strategies	Drinking excessively,
E J	Lack of support at work	
E	Good support at work	Team was supportive. Management was not and initially sided with the complainant
J	Participant (respondent ) lodged a counter complaint of bullying against the complainant	
L, E, J	Participant (respondent) applied for workers' compensation	This was surprising given the amount of complaints that went on work cover in the initial study of bullying complaint. Managers appeared more reluctant to apply for workers' compensation
J	Bullying complaint procedure not used	In all cases the organisation had a policy. Some complaints went directly to Safe Work SA, WorkCover or Union.
J	Union made complaint on behalf of worker/s	Very unionised workplace. Participant felt union bullied the organisation into not using the normal procedures to address the complaint.
J,P	Government agency investigation (Safe Work SA )	Some complainants went straight to government agency by-passed internal complaint system. Seen as not fair for following internal procedure
P	Bullying claim substantiated	Most think not fair, Little insight into behaviour
P,J	Bullying claim not substantiated	Angry had to go thorough investigation believes an apology needed. Believe they are the victims
P	Unknown result	Feels she is in limbo
J, P	Complainant refused to undertake mediation	Most respondents said that they wanted to have mediation and tell their side of the story, but this was refused by the complainant Linked to power issues and justice
J	Injustice	A number of participants talked about the unfairness of process, outcome. Very important issue of participants
A	Reluctant to manage poor	



	performance since complaint/Low confidence in ability	
A	Keep work purely professional now	Talked about being less friendly to staff and delineating much more between professional and personal life
E	Left workplace	Resigned, transferred to another site, employment terminated, stress leave
A, E	Reputation now soured by compliant	'Mud sticks', 'lingering doubts about me', 'ongoing rumours', 'feel like I am always under review now'
A	Lack of debriefing or follow-up	

### Legend

- An Antecedents
- A Aftermath / consequences (links closely with Emotional reponse)
- C Aspects of the complaint itself
- E Emotional response
- J Justice, Justification
- P Power (linked closely with Justice)

## **Appendix G: List of Abbreviations**

<b>ADR</b>	Alternative Dispute Resolution
<b>AHRC</b>	Australian Human Rights Commission
<b>CPB</b>	Counterproductive Workplace Behaviour
<b>DASS</b>	Depression Anxiety Stress Scales
<b>EAP</b>	Employee Assistance Provider
<b>GP</b>	General Medical Practitioner
<b>HR</b>	Human Resources
<b>HREOC</b>	Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission
<b>IR</b>	Industrial Relation
<b>LEADR</b>	Leading Edge Alternate Dispute Resolvers
<b>NAQ</b>	Negative Acts Questionnaire
<b>NAQ-R</b>	Negative Acts Questionnaire - Revised
<b>OCS</b>	Organisational Commitment Scales
<b>OHSW</b>	Occupational Health, Safety and Welfare
<b>SAEOC</b>	South Australian Equal Opportunity Commission
<b>TAFE</b>	Technical and Further Education
<b>UK</b>	United Kingdom

## **Appendix H: Presentations Based on the Work Presented in This Thesis**

### **Journal articles (submitted)**

- Jenkins, M. F., Winefield, H., Sarris, A., & Zapf, D. (submitted 2010). Listening to accused bullies: An exploratory study of bullying allegations from the perspectives of the accused bully. Final revisions in response to reviewer comments submitted to the *British Journal of Management*.
- Jenkins, M. F., Winefield, H., & Sarris, A. (2011) Consequences of being accused of workplace bullying: An exploratory study. *International Journal of Workplace Health Management*, 4 (1), 33-47
- Jenkins, M. F. (In press 2011). Is mediation appropriate for workplace bullying complaints? An evidence-based approach.(Accepted for publication in *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, Volume 29 (1), due for publication November 2011)

### **Peer-reviewed oral conference presentations**

- Jenkins, M. F., Winefield, H., & Sarris, A. (2008). *Workplace Bullying: Perceptions of organisational justice and outcomes in workplace bullying policies and procedures*. Paper presented at the 6<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Workplace Bullying, Montreal, Canada (June 2008).
- Jenkins, M. F., Zapf, D., Winefield, H., & Sarris, A. (2010). *Listening to the bullies: An exploratory study of managers accused of workplace bullying*.

Paper presented at the 7<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Workplace Bullying Conference, Cardiff, Wales (June 2010).

- Jenkins, M. F., Winefield, H., & Sarris, A. (2010). *Sticks and stones will break my bones and names will also hurt me: An exploratory study of managers accused of workplace bullying*. Paper presented at the 10<sup>th</sup> National Medication Conference, Adelaide, South Australia (September 2010).

#### **Poster presentations**

- Jenkins, M. F., Winefield, H., & Sarris, A. (2008, October). *Perceptions of injustice. The Consequences of complaining about workplace bullying*. Presented at the South Australian WorkCover Conference, Adelaide.
- Jenkins, M. F., Winefield, H., & Sarris, A. (2008, October). *Claiming for fairness' sake: What makes bully victims claim workers' compensation*. South Australian WorkCover Conference, Adelaide.

#### **Invited seminars**

- Jenkins, M. F., Winefield, H., & Sarris, A. (April 2008). *Why are managers accused of bullying: A thematic analysis from interviews with alleged bully perpetrators*. Presented to the Business SA Conference.
- Jenkins, M. F., Winefield, H., & Sarris, A. (July, 2008). *Workplace bullying: Perceptions of organisational justice and outcomes in workplace bullying complaints*. Presented to the Department of Organisational Psychology Colloquium, University of Frankfurt, Germany.

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