



HRM's Response to Workplace Bullying: Complacent, Complicit and Compounding

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Abstract

Perceptions of human resource (HRM) management's response to worker bullying were investigated through a netnographic analysis of written comments concerning an online 'TEDx' talk called "Bullying and Corporate Psychopaths at Work" to help determine whether HRM are seen as supportive of bullied workers. This research utilized a qualitative, ethnographic approach deemed to be highly valid in researching sensitive areas such as that of workplace bullying. Findings align with, deepen, and extend previous theory and knowledge in that a key finding that emerges is that HRM is deemed by workers to be capable of, but unwilling to deal effectively with, bullying managers. HRM are seen as complacent in that they do little about psychopathic bullies, complicit in that they support managerial bullies and compounding in that they worsen outcomes from workers' point of view. It appears that HRM has therefore lost the trust of this sample of bullied workers. The paper is a first to apply a netnographic analysis to the problem of workplace bullying and reveals HRM fails to deal with it to worker's satisfaction. Implications include that the ubiquitous prevalence of workplace bullying around the world could continue unabated unless strict, clear codes of conduct are established and policed by HRM or non-HRM related forms of intervention are mobilized.

Keywords Workplace bullying · HRM · Trust · Corporate psychopaths · Psychopathy

Introduction

Workplace bullying is an all too pervasive and unethical feature of contemporary workplace life (Cowan et al., 2021; Geldenhuys, 2020) with pernicious implications for individuals and organizations alike (Cowan & Fox, 2015; Cowan et al., 2021). This systematic interpersonal mistreatment constitutes a depressing catalogue of on-going unethical behavior such as the withholding and withdrawing of necessary information, alienation, refusals of legitimate applications for leave, and the removal of responsibility without prior consultation (Magee et al., 2014). The effects of workplace bullying are costly being linked to worker

stress, high staff turnover, absenteeism, and deviant retaliation worker behavior (Djurkovic et al., 2021; Tuckey et al., 2022; Yao et al., 2022). Corporate psychopaths are deemed to be extreme bullies (Boddy & Taplin (2017) and so the comments under the TEDx talk may refer to experiences of extreme bullying.

Seemingly, there is no doubt that responsibility for dealing with workplace bullying including the perpetrator is within Human Resource Management's (HRM's) domain. This is to the extent that HRM are identified as needing to *own* the problem of workplace bullying (Harrington et al., 2012, 2015). In line with this view, commentators have argued that HRM should actively prevent workplace bullying (Cowan et al., 2021) for example, through provision of policy and information (Salin, 2008) and that HR practitioners are the people most often left to interpret and respond to complaints of bullying (Fox & Cowan, 2015). It is unsurprising therefore that calls for HRM to provide good practice recommendations in relation to workplace bullying have been made (Cowan et al., 2021). Yet, HRM's apparent clear responsibility for effectively attending to this unethical behavior is not as straight forwards as it likely appears.

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In an early paper that considers ethics and a resource-based view of the organization, Guest and Woodrow (2012) explore the ambiguities and constraints for successfully bringing about ethical HRM practices (Guest & Woodrow, 2012) while Greenwood questions whether HRM can be ethical at all (Greenwood, 2002). The difficulties HRM personnel report in effectively responding to employee complaints of bullying have been attributed to several factors, including conflicts between separate HR roles in the organization, a lack of detailed organizational policies and guidelines for dealing with bullying, and ambiguous definitions of what bullying is (Fox & Cowan, 2015). Calls have been made for ethically oriented HRM systems to make negative workplace behavior less severe and questions have been raised as to whether HRM are a part of the problem of workplace bullying or part of the solution to it (Salin, 2020) while it has been suggested that the HR manager's role as a strategic partner may make them likely to side with management in bullying situations.

In relation to HRM and bullying, existing literature draws attention to the role conflicts that are inherent in the HRM practitioners position, where they represent management interests while also promoting employee advocacy (Catley et al., 2017; Page & Mgwenya, 2023). HRM may conform to and prioritize management interests in order to appease management, minimize negative consequences for themselves, such as loss of employment or exclusion from decision-making, and attempt to establish themselves as credible partners to management (Page & Mgwenya, 2023).

Criticisms of HRM can lead them to feel undervalued and marginalized but attempting to simultaneously uphold the perceived interests of the organization and its employees can be stressful (Page & Mgwenya, 2023). Addressing unethical behavior from management may come at the cost of one's job or influence because of the greater power inherent in management (Page & Mgwenya, 2023) exacerbated by the fact that most reports of bullying are from superior to subordinate (Catley et al., 2017). On the other hand, because of the relative powerlessness of employees, from HRM's point of view, not addressing bullying only comes at the cost of HRM's reputation for fairness.

Besides the role ambiguity in terms of whether HRM advocates for management or for employees, there is further role ambiguity in that HRM can be confused as to what their role should be. They wonder whether they are impartial investigators of bullying claims or mediators who are there to help the accusers and the accused come to some agreement or trusted listeners to employees complaints or advisors to management and upholders of the organization's interests against possible lawsuits resulting from bullying (Djurkovic et al., 2021) or some combination of all of these roles.

Inherent to this now contemporary debate (Braga et al., 2021) is the nature of HRM's dichotomous relationship lived through responsibilities towards those at the 'coal-face', in other words HRM's ethical responsibilities towards workers' well-being (Alzola, 2018) and its more 'corporate' responsibilities. A case in point being that the move towards strategic HRM (SHRM) leads to the pursuit of corporate goals and inevitable alignments and liaisons between HRM and senior management. Perhaps, hardly surprising therefore is that research finds workers to be dissatisfied with HRM practitioners' responses to complaints of workplace bullying (Harrington et al., 2012). Moreover, the implementation of workplace bullying policies by HRM departments is regarded as uneven, with complaints of workplace bullying persistently high because of inadequate HRM interventions (Woodrow & Guest, 2014).

There is now a not insignificant body of scholarship which helps illuminate an understanding of bullying behaviors in the workplace. Cumulative insights are also offered in a systematic review of workers' perceptions of HRM practices in general (Beurden et al., 2021). Yet the literature is less well developed in the context of workers' perceptions of how HRM responds to complaints of workplace bullying. More work is required therefore to unpack this specific phenomenon (Cooke et al., 2020) and not least of all because workers' perceptions of HRM practices shape satisfaction and ultimately impact organizational performance (Den Hartog et al., 2013).

The theme and subject matter of the current research emerge unexpectedly from posted online comments following a TEDx talk delivered by the first author on sub-clinical psychopathy and workplace bullying. Accordingly, questions that we pose in response to these data, and which guide our analysis are '*What are workers' perceptions of HRM's response to workplace bullying?*' and '*What does the relationship between HRM, corporate psychopathy and bullying look like?*'.

The qualitative nature of the posted comments enables us to better understand and make sense of workers' stories and experiences of how HRM deals with bullying. Given that we investigate bullying in general through the lens of sub-clinical psychopathy, the next section of this paper sets out the association between sub-clinical psychopathy and bullying, thereafter we discuss who psychopaths are, the research approach, how we analyzed the data examined and what the main findings are. These findings are then discussed, and conclusions drawn concerning HRM's perceived response to workplace bullying. In summary, we seek to contribute new and salient knowledge in understanding these complex phenomena.

Bullying and Corporate Psychopaths

The total factors influencing bullying at work have yet to be fully explored (McAllister & Perrewé, 2018) however, workplace bullying and sub-clinical psychopathy have long been linked (Spindel, 2008) and bullying is a pathognomonic indicator of psychopathy. A 2012 TEDx talk, available online, considers some of the associations between psychopathy and bullying. In particular sub-clinical psychopathy and bullying is associated with destructive leadership (Harvey et al., 2007) as well as destructive workplace cultures (Baillien et al., 2009). Sub-clinical psychopaths, as they have come to be called, are deemed to be generators of such destructive cultures (Downs, 2012). HRM struggles to deal with destructive leadership in the workplace (Holland, 2019) and the current paper examines this phenomena through the lens of corporate psychopathy theory, which posits that with the progressively more rapid turnover of corporate personnel, together with superficial selections methods involving desultory background checks, the psychopathic increasingly gain leadership positions and bring their influence to bear to ensure organizational decisions are made in their favor. Theoretically, if corporate psychopathy theory is correct, then, bullying should be pervasive and uncontrolled.

Psychopaths are deemed to be morally irresponsible people, lacking in integrity, empathy and conscience (Adshad, 2003) but who can get ahead within organizations (Babiak et al., 2010; Furnham, 2014). This ability is perhaps aided by their selfish and rational approach to economic life and they can easily be mistaken for successful leaders (Andrews et al., 2009) with qualities that appear attractive to HRM (Tudosoiu et al., 2019a). They are thus found occupying positions of organizational power (Basham, 2011). Commentators suggest that HRM should be vigilant towards psychopathic behavior at work because it presents a serious threat to ethical corporate behavior (Marshall et al., 2015).

Socialized psychopathy has long been conceptualized as existing at the organizational level (Daneke, 1985) with persuasive arguments made that corporations are psychopathic in their legal make-up and DNA (Bakan, 2004). The widespread nature of workplace bullying supports this viewpoint. In this scenario, direct and indirect managerial controls can create a culture of bullying in which top management and HRM not only neglect workers' legal rights but also abuse and humiliate workers via coercion (Ahmed & Uddin, 2021). Thus workplace bullying can be understood as endemic in the capitalist employment relationship (Beale & Hoel, 2011) and findings in the current research show that the role of HRM appears to be to support employment relationships that are exploitative via

their abusiveness. However, whatever the source of the bullying reported on in this paper, it is the perceived reactions of HRM to reports of bullying which are of primary concern.

The current study therefore investigates how workers view HRM in relation to workplace bullying and investigates this via an ethnographic (Stafford, 1993) approach among an online group. Such an approach is referred to as 'netnographic' (Kozinets, 2007) and is described below. This type of qualitative research is concerned with developing a breadth and depth of understanding rather than with obtaining definitive results (Boddy, 2016).

Research Method and Approach

In attempting to unpack workers' perceptions of how HRM deals with bullying we make use of netnographic thematic analysis. The rise of netnography as a qualitative research methodology can be traced to the US in the 1990s and unsurprisingly corresponds to the emergence of the internet (Costello et al., 2017). However, it is not until 2002 that this approach was actually recognized as a new technique in qualitative research to aid researchers in the study of online communities (Kozinets, 2002) and thereafter acknowledged as effective for analyzing the very same (Bowler Jr, 2010). This approach is especially relevant to the current research as netnography delivers insights to the complexities of organizational life by examining boundaries where interpersonal power and inequality play out, as in the case of bullying (O'Doherty & Neyland, 2019).

A netnographic approach is deemed to be effective for researching online groups because it provides a rich source of data, which is relatively free of researcher and respondent bias, especially social desirability bias, because of its unobtrusive and naturalistic approach (Kozinets et al., 2014). Subjects are not inhibited by the reality of face to face participation in discussing sensitive topics (Langer & Beckman, 2005) and this is aided by the anonymity of research subjects, making the approach well suited to the study of workplace bullying. We doubt that other research approaches such as running focus group discussions or even undertaking in-depth interviews would have facilitated the emergence of such forthright comments in this sensitive area.

Netnography is defined as "a specific approach to conducting ethnographic research that uses the archival and communications functions of contemporary internet-based technologies ... (it) begins with ethnography's participant-observational, humanistic, and often socially critical stance and selectively adds specifically adapted practices" (Kozinets, 2007).

As observers of naturally occurring conversations, ethnographic researchers do not steer the investigation via

pre-conceived questions. Researchers passively observe and note what is being discussed. It is what is important to the subjects that emerges rather than what is deemed important by the researcher. Its unobtrusiveness makes it suitable for research into areas respondents may find sensitive to discuss (Langer & Beckman, 2005) making it appropriate for use in research into bullying. Further, respondents do not engage in giving socially desirable answers because they are discussing an issue of concern within a virtual discussion which aims to share experiences, opinions, and feelings in a more-or-less anonymous online environment. A rich source of valid data is therefore provided because of netnographics' real-life approach (Kozinets et al., 2014). Here, the high validity of results is seen as a benefit (Xharavina et al., 2020) and it is deemed an ethical and legitimate approach (Langer & Beckman, 2005) which has been adopted around the world and across disciplines (Costello et al., 2017).

By 4th September 2020 the website talk on corporate psychopaths and bullying had attracted 975,656 views and 924 comments which were downloaded onto a 140-page transcript for review. The talk considers the reported personalities of bullies and those of psychopaths and notes the similarities. All comments were examined for material relevant to bullying and HRM's response, whether these comments were positive, negative, or neutral in relation to HRM. We consider this approach is equal to the task of unpacking complex organizational phenomena which in the current research is workers' perceptions of how HRM responds to bullying.

Data Analysis

The 140-page transcript was examined by two researchers for emerging and recurring themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The comments were thematically analyzed for commonalities in ideas and conceptualizations of HRM's role in dealing with bullying. An aim of ethnographic studies is to tell the story from the subject's point of view rather than the researcher's viewpoint (Bowler Jr, 2010) therefore this paper presents numerous quotes. Quotes are associated with the online monikers of the people making the comments, so that the reader can see to what extent the comments come from different commentators.

Comments are still being added to the site and are publicly visible with unrestricted access, meaning that other researchers can easily replicate and up-date this study to verify findings or investigate other bullying-related areas. Findings are discussed below. We immersed ourselves in analyzing our data through thematic analysis. This approach is considered as especially relevant given its flexible epistemic approach incorporating relativism and constructivism (Fenton-O'Creevy et al., 2011). Netnographic, thematic analysis (NTA) allows our data to inductively talk to us.

The transcript of online posted comments was analyzed with preliminary codes and themes emerging from these data. The researchers subsequently engaged in discussion, from which we debated and agreed on four key themes which we believe conceptualize and express the essential features of the online community's perceptions of HRM's role in dealing with bullying.

Findings

Findings can broadly be sorted into four main themes; firstly, dealing with bullying at work is assumed to be the responsibility of the HRM function, secondly, HRM are perceived as being complacent in dealing with workplace bullying, thirdly HRM chooses to side with management (complicity); and lastly HRM is a source of bullying, exacerbating (compounding) the problems further as outlined in (Table 1).

Sub-themes included those that HRM don't or can't help workers subjected to bullying, HRM side with management over workers subjected to bullying, HRM siding with management is deemed harmful to organizations, HRM bullies can be complained about to corporate headquarters, HRM are recruiting psychopathic workers, HRM should learn about psychopathic bullying and finally HRM are not worth approaching about bullying. Each of these themes are discussed below.

Main Theme 1—Dealing with Workplace Bullying is Assumed to be HRM's Responsibility

In line with the extant literature (Harrington et al., 2015) there is an underlying assumption held by the online commentators that responsibility for dealing with bullying is without question HRM's. As one worker noted:

I took notes (on the bullying behavior) for 3 months: Dates, times, events, names, witnesses. I made copies and sent them to HRM. (Online moniker: John)

Some workers viewed HRM as a function which should be devoted to helping, safeguarding, and policing the organization as a whole; much like an immune system protects the body from toxins and biological invaders. This view entailed the assumption that HRM could and should aid workers victimized by workplace bullying.

If a member of management is creating toxicity, then the workers and the other management should report them to HRM. HRM needs to act like an immune system to cut out the diseased workers once they are identified. HRM should do their due diligence and investigate every claim like an FBI agent. (Online moniker: lonnieherbals)

Table 1 Summary of main and sub-themes

Examples of codes/ideas	Sub-themes	Themes	Main themes
An example of a comment coded as assuming bullying is HRM's responsibility is "HRM should do their due diligence and investigate every claim like an FBI agent."	HRM should investigate bullying	HRM should engage with bullying	Dealing with workplace bullying is assumed to be HRM's responsibility
"They tried going to human resources, but they didn't do anything."	HRM don't act on complaints of bullying	HRM don't or can't help workers subjected to bullying	HRM are perceived as being complacent in dealing with workplace bullying
"When directors and HRM go along with a manager on an act of faith, you have an atmosphere ripe for bullying."	HRM siding with management over bullying was deemed harmful to organizations	HRM side with management over workers subjected to bullying	Workers perceive HRM as complicit in workplace bullying
"They hired one as my dept head. The most toxic person I've ever met. Clever tongue, ... he always able to slither his way out using his words."	HRM are recruiting psychopathic workers HRM should learn about psychopathic bullying HRM are not worth approaching about bullying HRM compound workplace bullying		
If you are fighting off management bullies, then call corporate to complain about HRM if human resources is the bully	Bullying links with neoliberal capitalism. (Not reported on further in the current paper)	HRM bullies can be complained about to corporate headquarters	HRM Can be bullies themselves

One view was that HRM personnel should be protected by law so that they can investigate such matters without fear of reprisal from the bullies concerned.

My view is ... HRM should be extra protected by employment law so that they cannot be intimidated (Online moniker: Stbs Abs)

Main Theme 2—HRM are Perceived as Being Complacent in Dealing with Workplace Bullying

Workers in the online community perceive HRM as sitting on their hands when it comes to dealing with workplace bullying. In sum, HRM are perceived to not do anything effective about it. As one worker recounts:

*They tried going to human resources, but they didn't do anything. (Online moniker: GreenRiver)
(As an example of coding this comment was coded as falling under the inaction/complacency code and theme).*

HRM's complacency in dealing with workplace bullying is illustrated by the following observation:

He treated one co-worker so badly the young man quit. He went to management many times, and nothing was done.... management does not see the problem, even after the three of us have complained. (Online moniker: dhh488)

HRM may consider workplace bullying too hot to handle (Harrington et al., 2012), or they are oblivious to it:

She only smiles in the faces of leadership. They (HRM) are blind to it! (Online moniker: Inspired by a Beautiful life)

HRM are also complacent, it appears likely due to being afraid of upsetting the status quo. As one worker observes:

Human Resources and anybody who is supervising ... in the workplace whether it be white color or blue color human resources is a bunch of COWARDS (Online moniker: Jill)

HRM fails to take any action despite evidence to the contrary which should alert them to something less than acceptable occurring in the workplace. As one worker states:

Our Controller was so toxic & harassing to anyone she deemed weak that she pushed many people out of the company. Complaints to HRM & management were ignored. (Online moniker: Cris)

Sub-Theme: HRM Don't or Can't Help Workers Subjected to Bullying

Notwithstanding that HRM are viewed as the organizational function that workers should be able to turn to when they are subjected to bullying, there is a cynical acceptance that what happens in reality plays out very differently. HRM can view employees as overly emotional beings who need to be managed and controlled for the good of the organization (Schneider, 1999) rather than for their own well-being.

A sub-theme uncovered in this research was that HRM does not help bullied workers, or cannot prevent the bullying, particularly when management are involved in the bullying. This corresponds with previous studies of bullying which have discussed that bullying may be tacitly accepted by organizational leadership (Vega & Comer, 2005) but results in organizational decay and is associated with unethical values at work (Valentine et al., 2018).

The persuasiveness of psychopathic bullies was mentioned as one reason why HRM may not aid the bullied.

My biggest fear is even (my) notes alone won't save me because psychopaths are so good at manipulation that they can convince Management, Supervisors and HR to go against me. (Online moniker: I Love My Beard)

The upward impression management skills and manipulation abilities of psychopathic bullies is alluded to and/or mentioned in the comments below.

I had a superior Officer who was a textbook psychopath. She made life miserable for anyone who worked immediately under her. She ruthlessly tormented anyone who was better qualified, educated or capable than she was... Anyone above her thought she was perfect. (Online moniker: Shawn)
Also HEAVILY agree on the manipulation – it's a means to an end for them to get more money/promotion or to isolate you by playing other managers against you. (Online moniker: Nikos)

The literature identifies the perception that senior leaders tend to see the psychopathic as highly productive rising stars in organizations (Boddy et al., 2015), and they are therefore supported by management despite any reports of their abusive behavior.

They are incredible able to self-promote and have no inhibition for undermining others unfortunately, they are often confused to be high performers or high potentials and are continuously supported by management. (Online moniker: miaeurope)
Unfortunately, my team lead is a bully and a coward too. Those above him see him as a genius, a genius

who is disliked by everyone managed by him. (Online moniker: Slartibartfast)

People in wider society are also fooled by the mask of the corporate psychopath who often appears to be a pillar of society. The comment below relates to a medical doctor, who like the psychopathic serial killer Dr Harold Shipman, is loved by those around her. Shipman's charming bedside manner was very popular among his patients, even as he was methodically killing them (Berry-Dee, 2017).

An attractive, intelligent, generous, highly moral, well respected and well-loved medical doctor in private practice... Though outwardly she is wonderful, her immediate family pay the price... She is not quite a psychopath, but she is more of a narcissist ... The best description of her is Satan disguised as an angel. (Online moniker: Keith)

That psychopathic bullies are unstoppable was given as another potential reason HRM may be reluctant to intervene.

And what's even sadder is that not even your boss, HRM or a hefty lawsuit can put a stop to these monsters! (Online moniker: qwaynehenny)

This ability to manipulate and impress others for instrumental purposes is reported to be a feature of psychopathic behavior and they are reported to be able to talk themselves out of trouble with subtle and plausible sounding rationalizations (Cleckley, 1941/1988) to the extent that those above them consider them star workers while their subordinates think of them as malevolently abusive (Boddy et al., 2015).

Main Theme 3—Workers Perceive HRM as Complicit in Workplace Bullying

Workers in the online community perceive HRM as complicit in workplace bullying. This is a theme that predominates throughout online exchanges. In other words, HRM actively sides with the hierarchy and conversely alienates and in some cases removes the victim from the organization. HRM are reported to prioritize their relationships with managers and conversely distrust workers' bullying claims. An implication is that HRM are actively facilitating bullying. HRM are reported to assume that managers are to be sided with, and this complicity is reported to aid workplace bullying as demonstrated by the quote below.

When directors and HRM go along with a manger on an act of faith, you have an atmosphere ripe for bullying. Psychos need an external force to stop them because they have no conscience. (Online moniker: Hywel)

The assumption that HRM tends to side with management is reflected in other studies of bullying at work where bullying is seen as being difficult for HRM to handle because of the conflicting demands of their positions (Harrington et al., 2012). With HRM's role alignment being towards managers, HRM practitioners were previously found to prioritize their relationships with managers and to automatically distrust workers' bullying claims which may be seen as 'too hot to handle' for HRM practitioners, taking into account the risks to their relationships with management (Harrington et al., 2012). A comment aligned with this view is below.

It's pervasive. But nothing is done about it. These bullies are protected from the top and anyone who stands against them is labeled, fired, demoted, downsized, etc... (Online moniker: Healing Discovery)

HRM are reported to take action to remove victims from employment rather than deal with the managerial bullies, even when the details of the bullying are well documented and corroborated by witnesses.

This is what I still don't get, I was with a company over 6 yrs. and a supervisor and a manager that was just hired bullied me so badly that HRM let ME go! I had stacks of documents & hard evidence I'd been collecting plus 7 other managers & co-workers who witnessed this willing to back me up. (Online moniker: kara)

The idea that abusive behavior is difficult for workers to deal with because often they have never come across anything similar at work, is to be found in the literature, e.g. (Delbecq, 2001) and is also reflected in the comment below. This quote also illustrates the knock-on effect that workplace bullying has on wider society. The families of the bullied may bear the brunt of these ill-effects.

This happened to my sibling who is a highly qualified professional with years of experience. They couldn't fully understand what was happening because they had never experienced this type of behavior in the workplace before. Eventually they went to human resources and shortly after they were fired. This triggered a nervous breakdown and has devastated my sibling and the whole family who have had to become caregivers. (Online moniker: Cynthia)

Managers are reported to be unused to and ill-equipped for dealing with uncivil behavior at work (Pearson & Porath, 2005) and this theme emerging in current results supports this contention.

Sub-Theme: HRM Side with Management Over Workers Subjected to Bullying

HRM was described as in league with management to subvert natural justice and protect the bullies. This is also the perception gained from other research into bullying at work (Woodrow & Guest, 2014) and this external triangulation supports the validity of the findings uncovered in the current research.

There is no accountability for managers who are in league with HRM. They are just a club, and you better not cross them. (Online moniker: H.A.)

They hired one as my dept head. The most toxic person I've ever met. Clever tongue, ... he always able to slither his way out using his words. He drove one of my co-workers to a nervous breakdown and finally resign ... My co-worker reported him to our HRM and CFO but ended up becoming the gossip of the week amongst the top, so he resigned. (Online moniker: H.A.)

The comments below indicate that HRM can be perceived to be complacent about, or dismissive of, worker claims or to ignore such claims and decide to act against the claimant, rather than the bullies. These actions are deemed unethical and duplicitous by workers.

I let HRM at headquarters know and they said "well, this sounds like you are screaming 'victim, victim, victim'". They watch out for each other. (Online moniker: David)

I faced bullying once in an MNC I worked when I reported it, I got fired for it and that organization is a Giant MNC (Online moniker: Amin)

I tried to report them many times, but the management dismissed it as "personality conflicts". (Online moniker: Deborah)

Past findings also suggest that HRM practitioners rarely judge situations as bullying where a manager is accused (Harrington et al., 2012), current findings extend this because workers also believe that the bullied are more likely to get fired than the bullies. The prominent role of toxic managers in staff exit behavior was also mentioned and this aligns with findings from other case studies where high levels of staff exits in the face of psychopathic leadership have been reported (Boddy & Croft, 2016; Clarke, 2005).

What if the bully is the narcissistic boss? About 7 of us are leaving come June. (Online moniker: Jen)

My wife's new director has been managing now for 2 years, and 12 of her co-workers have quit. (Online moniker: GreenRiver)

Clarke, in his book on psychopaths in the workplace, describes a case involving an apparently successful but

psychopathic executive (pp. 6–22) who was investigated after one of his former subordinates sued the company for the emotional damage they had suffered. A subsequent in-house investigation found that at one stage 75% of the psychopath's staff left over an 18-month period. The investigation also uncovered the serial sexual abuse of female staff members and numerous sexual affairs with female subordinates (Clarke, 2005). This high level of staff exits is supported by current research as indicated by the quotes below.

Management was letting worker after worker go before addressing the real issue of the bully! (Online moniker: Amber)

Within months to the first 2-3 years of her being there, more than a third of the office quit, or was bullied out. The place became a living nightmare, a hellish place to work. Our new (young) supervisor was a corporate psychopath! (Online moniker: BLACK.LIKE)

After a 25-page analysis on my part against the company, I won my case, and I was compensated. Yet the psychopath is now in charge and every other colleague of mine has resigned. (Online moniker: dimitri)

This description of the workplace being a terrible or hellish environment is echoed in the extant literature on psychopathic leadership and management, where workers leave as soon as they can. The last comment, above, concerning every colleague leaving is also supported in the literature where everyone left a UK charity after a new CEO was appointed (Boddy, 2017).

Lacking a perception of organizational support (Djurkovic et al., 2008) means bullied workers are more likely to leave when they deem HRM as non-supportive, as many of the comments in the current research seem to support.

Repeatedly, I've seen in my own workplace complaints of bullying being ignored and bullies protected. (Online moniker: Jack Emerald city sider)

Sub-Theme: HRM Siding with Management Over Bullying was Deemed Harmful to Organizations

The evidence-based research literature is relatively unanimous that corporate psychopaths are harmful to organizational success and longevity, e.g., (Marshall et al., 2013) and this is reflected in the comment below.

It is so ironic isn't it, that the person causing the company the most money (in terms of staff loss, productivity loss, reputation loss, etc.) is the one who is rewarded by the company with things like HRM protection (they'll defend the demons to the hilt) and promotion. (Online moniker: Nibbler)

The potentially adverse influence of psychopathic bullies on other areas of organizational productivity was alluded to in the comment below where bullying is posited as a cover-up behavior to disguise even more unethical activities.

Corporate bullies are successful because they hide ineptitude & corrupt behavior by crushing those who would dare oppose them, and they are actually successful in the corporate world because they have no conscience. (Online moniker: Smileyrie)

The worst is that the minute I started to stick up for myself or point out what was going on to the upper management they supported the bully! (Who was damaging their business ... and deceiving them) (Online moniker: Amber)

HRM is seen to be acting in collusion with management to defend bullies and cover up or ignore bullying as described in the comments below.

The human resources covered up the matter in collusion with general manager and chief financial officer. (Online moniker: Rabah)

Administration does nothing but cover it up. This has officially gotten out of hand. (Online moniker: Muffin44)

A reason for organizations not wanting to admit to bullying is that this may make them liable to lawsuits from victims. This has, as far as we are aware, not been a finding of other research into workplace bullying but it is compelling in relation to environments/countries with high litigations cultures.

That's because even though the company loses lots of money due to bullies, they stand to lose EVEN MORE MONEY if they officially acknowledge the person is a bully or punish the bully, because that would bolster the victim's assertions and give them ammo to use in a hostile work environment lawsuit. So, companies must deny ... bullying and dream up reasons that the victim is "the problem" and remove them ... before they gather irrefutable proof they can use in court. (Online moniker: Amanda)

Attacks from management aimed at countering accusations of bullying were mentioned as per the comment below.

One of the main problems as far as I can see it is that the bullying line manager will just try to turn it around & say you are not competent at your job - bullying is very difficult to prove. (Online moniker: two spirit penguin)

However, workplace bullying is associated with reduced performance measures (Sliter et al., 2012) and so this suppression of evidence approach to bullying must result in

sub-optimal outcomes for the organization as well as its workers.

Sub-Theme: HRM are Recruiting Psychopathic Workers

While only a tiny minority of employers appear to actively seek out psychopathic workers (Boddy et al., 2021), the conclusion of some researchers is that employers are inadvertently doing so because they mistake the characteristics of psychopaths as attractive (Hill & Scott, 2019), they word job advertisements in such a way as to attract the psychopathic (Clarke, 2005) or conduct worker searches without sufficient depth to weed out the abusive and psychopathic (Pendleton & Furnham, 2012). The comment immediately below corresponds with this view that organizations seek managers with psychopathic traits to carry out ruthless workplace decisions.

HRM evaluators have metrics to detect candidates with those “desirable” traits; they can easily weed out those IF they wanted, but the opposite is done. Their bottom line is that they get results, or as Machiavelli coined “the end justifies the means”. (Online moniker: Alejandro)

That organizations fail to identify and de-select abusive job candidates is described in the comment below.

Management must implement an effective Human Resources Department where job applicants with attitude problems should be rejected instead of being employed. (Online moniker: Steve)

Sub-Theme: HRM Should Learn About Psychopathic Bullying

One of the people involved in originally commissioning the TEDx talk, reported to the speaker that bullying was rife in the section of the university they worked in, and that they hoped their HRM people in the audience would thereby be alerted to the smooth and charming façade of some of those managers who bully. This sentiment also appears to be evident in the comment below as the comment voices a desire to show the talk to their HRM department.

This (talk) is totally spot on. Thank you for posting this. I want to play this at my next meeting with HRM. (Online moniker: livelonglovemuch)

Sub-Theme: HRM are Not Worth Approaching About Bullying

Some comments appear to rule out involving HRM in bullying issues because of their ineffectiveness and mindset. HRM was reported to be a laughingstock in terms of dealing

with workplace bullying as described in one of the comments below. Otherwise, HRM were seen as afraid of confronting management bullies or as compounding the problems related to bullying.

Where can workers go for help? Not HRM. (Online moniker: Sandra)

HRM in the US is a joke. They are there to protect the company and laugh off the worker who is being bullied, which in turn makes the problem worse. So, the only thing left is to leave. (Online moniker: Chili-Pepper)

I went to management about bullying, he turned it on me and defended the bully! (Online moniker: Carl Andrew)

Some comments describe HRM as so complicit in bullying that the existence of any remaining ethical organizations was questioned. Even in cases of sexual harassment, HRM was reported to be so inadequate as to not be worth approaching.

HRM seems to have failed by becoming complacent and self-serving. This culture is increasing as it is moving in at a fast pace. One can't help but wonder if there are any ethical, or at the very least, safe places to work anymore. (Online moniker: imdjc)

I'm dealing with this bully at my job, and it comes a couple months after a bout of very serious Sexual Harassment issue with multiple witnesses. I need some serious assistance and don't know where to turn. I've already learned our HRM mentality so that's out. (Online moniker: SuperHero LOVES Akita's)

Main Theme 4—HRM Compound Workplace Bullying

A final key theme that emerges from our data is that HRM make a harmful and pernicious situation worse, perhaps due to their limited understanding of the personalities of sub-clinical psychopaths, and their inability to unpack the complex phenomena of workplace bullying. As corporate psychopaths can be assumed to be spread within and across most large organizations (Boddy, 2010) there is no reason to assume that they would avoid careers in HRM. However, when HRM is perceived to be the source of bullying, workers regard this as a double betrayal in that those assumed to be in a policing role are nevertheless implicated in bullying, this merely compounds the situation rather than aiding resolution. To some this unwillingness to aid bullied workers is seen as a form of corruption. The humiliation of workers by HRM robs them of dignity which is crucial for worker well-being (Sayer, 2007) as illustrated by the following quotes.

My prior HRM supervisor ...is a Bully and is the HRM Supervisor, she would constantly ... tell me demeaning things. Because of this woman now I have PTSD. I don't understand how she is in HRM as she targets women instead of being supportive, she constantly humiliates and Bullies them! It's unethical for her to do this to workers and get away with it. (Online moniker: Namaste Chica)

In my experience most of the bullying comes from the HRM department. (Online moniker: Kaworu Nagisa) (Bullying) corporate sociopaths mostly live in the HRM dept ... the corrupt protect the corrupt. (Online moniker: cHRMisandcello)

When the bullies are within HRM this is perceived to leave abused workers with no sources to appeal for help to.

I am bullied by the owner's daughter and sister who also work in HRM. I have no-where to turn. (Online moniker: Tiffany and Co)

The location of bullies within HRM is perceived to be inappropriate by workers as described in the quote below.

A Corporate Bully supervisor... was extremely verbally abusive ... She left the firm and now works at Human Resources in NYC, it's ironic she works in HRM. She should not be in HRM and continue to be a bully to workers... (Online moniker: Namaste Chica)

Sub-Theme: HRM Bullies can be Complained About to Corporate Headquarters

While some viewed bullies within HRM as leaving bullied workers with no avenues for redress, others recommended approaching different areas of the organization or external agencies for help as described in the comments below.

If you are fighting off management bullies, then call corporate to complain about HRM if human resources is the bully. (Online moniker: Carlos)

In retrospect, a lawsuit is probably the best way to confront bullying in the workplace. Document everything meticulously, gather witness testimony and sue. Human Resources and upper management respond to lawsuits. (Online moniker: Carlos)

Discussion

Despite the uniformity of the current findings towards how HRM deal with bullying and psychopathy, other researchers have found that HRM do attempt to exclude corporate psychopaths from management. For example, some HRM are aware of the threat posed by corporate psychopaths and

attempt to select them out of consideration for managerial positions (Tudosoiu et al., 2019b). However, other HRM may mistake managerial candidate coolness for leadership potential and inadvertently appoint the psychopathic to leadership positions (Hill & Scott, 2019) thus potentially exacerbating bullying within organizations.

In pursuit of the key challenge of constructing and maintaining high performance organizations strategic HR has been concerned with identifying leaders who appear as the best resource for organizations to utilize in order to optimally attain organizational ambitions (Cowan et al., 2021). Leaders who are principled and responsible, are needed but they should also have good judgement, a deep understanding of the organization they seek to lead and a vision of an achievable future for that organization to labor towards. However, as Hill and Scott (2019) have noted, HR sometimes inadvertently selects the psychopathic rather than the transformational leader. The bullying and abuse of employees can then occur (Boddy et al., 2021). In this case, HRM can establish clear rules and codes of practice which are well-policed and visibly enforced in order to deter psychopathic behavior in the workplace (Laurijssen et al., 2023).

This recent work from Laurijssen and colleagues has explored how HRM can help to contain and constrain the behavior of the psychopathic in the workplace. This is via the establishment and overt enforcement of clear, codes of behavior and workplace ethics. Laurijssen et al. (2023) found that primary psychopathy in leaders, also referred to as successful psychopathy or corporate psychopathy, may be restrained by organizational contextual factors. In particular, they found that that the presence of clear rules weakened the positive association between primary psychopathic traits in leaders, and their self-serving and abusive behavior (Laurijssen et al., 2023). Nonetheless, in terms of bullying, HRM personnel may see themselves as stuck between the demands imposed upon them by their jobs and the demands of workers for fair outcomes relating to bullying.

The contribution that the function of HRM makes to organizational performance is now better understood in view of strategic HRM management scholarship (Ali et al., 2018). Workers perceive positive HRM practices with their attitudes towards the organization including commitment, creativity, job satisfaction and intention to stay (Hague, 2020).

Juxtaposed against this is evidence from the current study which shows workers to be critical of HRM in dealing with the messier, darker side of organizational life. Viewed through the lens of this online group, HRM is manipulable or complacent, worse complicit, and ultimately compounding in workplace bullying. Whilst responsibility for workplace bullying is assumed by workers to be that of HRM, it makes no such assumption itself. We are then left with what appears to be an uncomfortable question for HRM: what is it that accounts for this behavior when experience in dealing

with conflict in the workplace is identified as "...the most important resource held by HRM professionals" (Roper & Higgins, 2020) (p.2) and the prevailing evidence shows a link between workers intention to quit and actual exits where HRM practices are perceived as non-supportive and moreover inequitable? (Djurkovic et al., 2008).

We speculate HRM is complacent in dealing with workplace bullying due to being an unfortunate part of the way in which, as a matter of course, and in an era of work intensification (Delbridge et al., 1992) organizations 'do things around here'. By compliance to norms, organizations attach much importance to practices that underpin the maintenance of behavioral prescriptions (Korte & Lin, 2013). Organizations operate in an increasingly turbulent, brutal environment and may embrace practices associated with inappropriate output measures which are then entrenched and become a risk factor in rewarding managers for bullying behavior (Samnani & Singh, 2012). Furthermore, in trying to do more with scarce resources, organizations imbue toxic competition between workers whereby bullying behavior is viewed as acceptable (Salin & Notelaers, 2020). Under conditions involving work intensification bullying may appear to be normative and acceptable, however, like bullying, work intensification is associated with worker stress and distress (Boxall & Macky, 2014; Chesley, 2014). In this environment, organizational boundaries are easily susceptible to a sub-clinical psychopath being recruited and ascending to a leadership position (Boddy et al., 2021) and their behavior goes unnoticed by HRM, the very function that should exist to be a gatekeeper and custodian of workers' and organizations' welfare (Boddy et al., 2021; Boulter & Boddy, 2020).

HRM's complicity in workplace bullying emerges as a dominant theme throughout our data. We speculate that HRM violates the 'H' in HRM because it actively aligns with the dictates of an employment system that puts financial profit above the welfare of workers (D'cruz et al., 2014). Previous researchers have written along these lines before and that workplace bullying is a symptom of intensified performance management in organizations (Harrington et al., 2013) in workplace environments where extreme pressures have become the norm (Boyle et al., 2013).

Whilst HRM should be integral to effectively managing workplace bullying, over the past couple of decades their organizational role has shifted away from the concerns of workers towards colluding with senior management. Thus, HRM is part of the problem in its involvement and active facilitating of practices that are wrongly perceived to be associated with gaining market position and profit. This is emphasized by Cowan & Fox (2015) who sum Ulrich's (1996) early work on the role of HRM. HRM "must learn to measure results in terms of business competitiveness rather than worker comfort" (p.121). Thus, HRM's alignment with senior management has altered their lens

through which bullying is viewed and instead of being workers' champion and dealing with such behavior in an equitable way, they are instrumental in the bullying. HRM thereby protects the apparent interests of the organization at the expense of supporting workers (Harrington et al., 2013).

This netnographic analysis of comments illustrates that HRM are perceived as complacent in that they appear unworried by workplace bullying, complicit in that they side with management bullies and are even a source of bullying themselves, compounding the problems in that they make outcomes worse. Findings are triangulated with extant literature in that the effects of being bullied were described in the current research as including inducing stress, 'PTSD', emotional upset, panic attacks, crying and psychological effects. This corresponds with previous research which posits that workplace bullying depletes workers emotional resources and can lead to suicidal impulses (Yao et al., 2021).

From our findings and the literature, several reasons why organizations may not want to adopt an employee-centric approach to resolving bullying have emerged, and these are summarized below. For example, if bullying is admitted then there may be legal repercussions for the organization if the victims attempt to seek legal redress (Sheehy et al., 2021) (Table 2).

Our findings that employees have lost the trust of HRM are echoed in the literature where HRM are described as being passive, untrustworthy, manager-centric and unsympathetic (Djurkovic et al., 2021) which seems far from the impartially investigative and active role that Catley recommends (Catley et al., 2017). It has been suggested that a realignment of HR roles, encompassing a greater focus on employee well-being should take place (Cowan et al., 2021) but this is not happening in our sample and it may be that it is an unrealistic expectation, given the increasingly ruthless nature of modern organizational leadership.

Nonetheless, if HR managers can demonstrate an association between a bully free work environment and organizational performance, they could act as anti-bullying champions (Salin, 2020) at least within organizations where the leadership prioritizes organizational performance over their own individual rewards.

A contribution to research is the finding that some HRM is seen as being unwilling to aid workers or disinclined to believe workers in disputes over bullying with managers and as predisposed to side with management even when ample evidence of, and witnesses to bullying exist. This confirms previous research which has highlighted the conflicted position HRM perceives itself to be in vis-a-vis dealing with bullying from the organizations' point of view but extends and contributes to this understanding by illustrating the depth of feeling against HRM when they perform this role. HRM are seen by some as hoodwinked and manipulated

by psychopathic bullies who present a charming, harmless façade. HRM are also seen as weak, complacent, cowardly, exploitative, complicit, managerial, corrupt, self-serving, ineffective, and colluding. Furthermore, HRM are seen as a source of bullying behavior themselves. These findings contribute to the HRM literature by giving an insight into the way HRM deals with bullying. Findings also contribute to the literature on corporate psychopaths as it extends this literature to investigate and theorize what happens after psychopathic bullying takes place. Are HRM, like employees themselves, afraid of confronting the psychopathic workplace bully?

Additionally, in ethnographic research like this, what is not discovered is often as telling as what is. In this research sample not one worker had a good word to report concerning HRM in relation to bullying; neutrality was the best opinion attributed to HRM and this was a minority view. HRM is often seen as one of the problems related to workplace bullying and not as part of any solution that is seen as fair or acceptable to bullied workers.

It may be that the roles of HRM in retaining key talent, solving conflicts, and resolving problems are in urgent need of clarification or modification. If HRM is unable to deal with workplace bullying in an objective, equitable and unbiased manner then some other means of intervening with it should arguably be sought. Otherwise, the worldwide ubiquitous prevalence of workplace bullying will continue unabated. This intervention could be via outside bodies such as unions, professional associations, or an industry-wide bullying ombudsman with significant powers to intervene, judge and make enforceable rulings on workplace bullying situations. However, such an approach may not deal with the systemic causes of bullying, including those relating to how workers are valued, cared for and treated.

Limitations

Participants in the commentary from which we sample, are self-selecting and so may be biased towards those who have internet access and to whom the talk on corporate

psychopathy and bullying is salient. These may be people who have experienced workplace bullying themselves or in relation to someone close to them. However, research shows that workplace categorically psychopathic bullying is 25–35% of all bullying and that it tends to be more extreme and more frequent. Thus, the findings from our research may not be generalizable to all bullying situations. Furthermore, as with similar-type research, it may be that online discussions like this attract the disenchanted more than those who are satisfied. Furthermore, whilst we investigated workplace bullying in general through the lens of sub-clinical psychopathy, this lens has limits. Not all bullies are sub-clinical psychopaths and bullying is sometimes endemic due to organizational characteristics, e.g., (Ahmed & Uddin, 2021).

Further Research

It may be that in seeking to side with management over allegations of bullying, in order to further organizational objectives and performance, HRM are detracting from organizational effectiveness via reducing the well-being, morale and engagement of employees. This could be explored in further research. Research into why HRM side with management over bullying allegations may also be interesting to conduct. The findings from this research indicate that HRM does not appear to engage with psychopathic bullying in an effective way. A question raised by this is why not? Are they charmed by the apparently friendly, sociable corporate psychopaths and taken in by their manipulateness and impression management skills? Alternatively, it may be that as corporate psychopaths establish a climate of fear, HRM are disinclined to challenge them or their bullying behavior out of concern about repercussions. These explanatory avenues may be worth exploring in further research into this phenomenon.

In terms of additional research it can easily be imagined that HRM's 'protection' of casual, day workers who may be even more open to exploitation and bullying than regular permanent workers (Purser, 2009) is not much better, and it appears likely a lot worse, than has been found in current

Table 2 Potential negative results of victim's successful bullying interventions from the organizational point of view

Legal	Once bullying is admitted the organization is open to legal repercussions from the actions of the individual victim seeking compensation for its negligence
Talent loss	The organization may lose managers (perpetrators) otherwise perceived to be effective or even star performers. Thus, there is a perceived talent and related productivity loss
Reputational	The organization suffers reputational damage and is seen as a less desirable place to work or to be employed by
Time losses	Time is lost to investigation, decisions as to suitable repercussions, and because of senior management involvement
Political power disruptions	Intervention disrupts the structure and flow of political power as new power equilibrium is sought, fought for, and established

research. This also could be an avenue of fruitful further investigation.

Conclusions

This research examined worker perceptions of HRM's response to workplace bullying. In summary, workers view bullying as pervasive, toxic, harassing, tormenting, manipulative, undermining, devastating, stressful, nightmarish, hellish, and unconscionable. Other findings include that the willingness, ability, neutrality, and ethics of HRM in dealing with bullying are doubted by these workers and it appears that HRM has almost completely lost the trust of these workers at least as it pertains to bullying.

One of the main and concerning themes that emerged from this research is that workers perceive HRM as being complicit in workplace bullying inasmuch as HRM appear to side with management over workers subjected to this toxic interpersonal phenomenon. There may well be a disconnect between what is traditionally expected from HRM and their more contemporary role which aligns them with the senior management team. Whatever, the cause this will need to be further unpacked in future research.

Declarations

Conflict of interest All authors declare they have no conflicts of interest.

Ethical Approval The procedures performed involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the UK Market Research Society and the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments and comparable ethical standards.

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