

## CHAPTER 4

### The bully

Many bullies choose the target that is competent in the group. They may target not only the vulnerable, but also those who threaten their sense of superiority or make them feel vulnerable (Yamada, 2000).

To be graced with the term “bully” does not bode well for the individual concerned in relation to their standing in the workplace as well as in society at large, as it does not provide pleasant reading when looking up the meaning of the word: aggressor, tormenter, oppressor, intimidator, persecutor, tyrant, to name a few. What then motivates a person to behave in such a manner that the unfortunate label of “bully” can be assigned to them?

Of course, there is no easy answer.

Konrad Lorenz, although not referring to workplace bullies, wrote in the original introduction of his book *On Aggression* (1966): “... aggression, that is to say the fighting instinct in beast and man which is directed *against* members of the same species” (p.3, original emphasis). He explains that animals, of the male gender, are biologically conditioned to fight over the means that are available to them. Lorenz ascribed animal mobbing (bullying) behaviour to instincts which are rooted in the struggle to thrive: Darwin’s theory on competition between individuals of the same species, or one species with another. He believed that most people are subjected to similar impulses that are innate but are capable of bringing these under control through rational thinking.

Keeping this thought in mind and relating Darwin’s theory to bullying in the workplace, where competition is fierce in the quest for survival as is the fear of being replaced, aggressive behaviour could indicate why workplace bullying occurs, and employees lash out at those in their vicinity who are perceived to present a threat.

The behaviour of a bully is fickle. It is unpredictable, insidious, inconsistent, and devious to the point where it may feel dangerous to the person it is directed at as they may feel helpless and cause them to doubt themselves. To study bullying at work has been described by Rayner and Cooper as like studying black holes, which is a very difficult pastime indeed for the simple reason that black holes are invisible but owe their “life” to surrounding planetary bodies (Rayner & Cooper, 2003). Falling into a black hole heralds a certain death, when the black hole is small. A process Stephen Hawking has described as “spaghettification”, a ripping apart, a vertical stretching and horizontal compression (Hawking, 1988).

This can easily be compared to the feeling an individual who has experienced bullying at work can relate to losing a sense of self, a destruction of their core beliefs, values, and principles; their very core

is being ripped apart. Therefore, Rayner and Cooper's comparison of bullying at work with black holes is an apt one, both having a crushing, destructive effect on that or those around it.

But of course, this is not the whole story.

### **The bully defined**

Are there different "types" of a bully? In general, a bully is an individual who displays dysfunctional behaviour. This may be intentional or not intentional, the latter being by those individuals who do not realize the effect their behaviour has on other people. They are also so-called accidental bullies, who show bullying behaviour infrequently, and possibly to get a point across, but not from a position of deviousness and deceit, power, and fear.

The question remains, however, whether there are intentional bullies, since those who do bully, may also not realize what they are doing, and the impact it has on others. They appear to operate from a position of fear, a need to control, and being driven by early experiences that formed their way of being. Their behaviour will be justified by explaining it as a clash of personalities, management style (high-handed, arbitrary, oppressive, and unreasonable), and poor interpersonal skills (brusque, aggressive, insensitive).

The emotional bonds formed in infancy and childhood may provide an answer to the reasons why a perpetrator of bullying others commits such behaviours.

John Bowlby (1982) and later Mary Ainsworth (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970) described, through their research with mothers and infants, different attachment styles: secure, ambivalent avoidant (insecure), avoidant (insecure), to which disorganised (insecure) was added later. Several studies since have supported Ainsworth's attachment styles and have suggested that attachment styles also have an impact on behaviours later in life. An insecure attachment style has been recognised as a predictor for the bullying behaviour of individuals in the workplace (Harms et al., 2016).

John Bowlby, psychologist, psychoanalyst, psychiatrist, (1907-1990) formulated attachment theory after researching the link between early childhood development and later personality development.

Bowlby observed that feelings did not diminish separation anxiety. Instead, he found that attachment was characterized by clear behavioural and motivation patterns. When children are frightened, they seek proximity with their primary caregiver in order to receive both comfort and care (Bowlby, 1982).

Bowlby later collaborated with the psychologist Mary Ainsworth (1919-1990). Ainsworth researched the emotional attachment between infant and primary caregiver, proposing the "strange situation" procedure. She, in collaboration with Bowlby, further developed the attachment theory (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970).

Attachment theory is a complex theory of infantile personality development and the ability for close emotional and social relationships later in life. In the first instance it is based on the quality of care given by the primary caregiver. It is suggested that early infant-caregiver interactions can significantly affect beliefs of the self, in areas such as coping with stress situations, interactions with others, adjusting and normalising emotion when an adult. The child experiences by example what others think, and how their own thoughts and experiences are perceived and interpreted, ultimately how others believe them to be. Further, the ability to understand and interpret, that is to mentalize, the rational, emotional, and intellectual state of the self and the other, together with the basic need to connect with others will result from a secure early relationship. An infant will develop a “secure base” if, in time of distress, they have learned to rely on and can turn to their consistently empathic and available caregiver who enables them to feel safe, protected and assured. Through a secure early start in life the infant will develop a positive self-image and is the predictor for forming and maintaining positive relationships later in life without a fear of being abandoned or hurt physically.

If the caregiver (usually a parent) is consistently failing to respond to distress in an uncaring, ignoring, indifferent, and even irritated way, the infant will start to avoid the caregiver when distressed and in need. The infant will start to avoid the caregiver when distressed and in need. They start to distrust their caregiver and become fearful of being abandoned. Although seeking approval from their caregiver the infant feels rejected. They will hold back their displays of distress when the caregiver is present. This “ambivalent avoidant” tactic is “insecure” and increases the risk for developing adjustment problems in later life and being frequently emotionally dependent.

An infant will deploy an avoidant strategy when they “experience and know” that their caregiver time and again responds to their distress in an unpredictable way. The infant resorts to an intense, excessive, and exaggerated display of distraught behaviour to draw the attention of the caregiver/parent in such a manner that it can hardly be missed. The infant learns that their emotional needs will not or hardly be met. They may feel unimportant, irrelevant, and unloved. This “avoidant” strategy will increase the risk of developing adjustment problems through childhood, the infant finding it difficult to understand another person’s emotions and will avoid committing to intimate relationships and bonding later in life.

Disorganised attachment usually develops through abusive behaviour of the caregivers. The caregiver’s behaviour is felt as being frightening, detached, sexualized, strange, out of the ordinary. Evidence has shown that those caregivers/parents who display uncharacteristic behaviours may have unresolved trauma, such as childhood sexual abuse, domestic violence, physical and/or emotional abuse. The young child develops “disorganised insecure attachment”.

Children of traumatized caregivers often develop problematic relationships with their caregiver/parent and may avoid intimate relationships with others in future relationships. With a lack of parental involvement, neglect to provide the young child with nurturing love, with attention and support in short supply (Einarsen et al., 1994), and a sense of belonging not experienced by the child, a

struggle for survival arises (Rigby & Slee, 1991). The child may have become used to aggressive behaviour having been witness to it and, not knowing otherwise, views it as the norm and may unfortunately grow to enjoy and copy aggression (Olweus, 1993). At first finding its way into the school environment where the struggle for a position of power and “survival” continues, this discovery contributes considerably to bullying behaviour in adolescents, and, if not attended to, the possibility of perpetuating this behaviour in the workplace (Adams, 1992). By imitating the behaviour and attitudes of caregivers/parents or other individuals in their early life the bully has acquired/learnt the same destructive behaviour (Fryling et al., 2011), and through their unfulfilled need for power and to offset the feelings of powerlessness the bully is born. Most perpetrators of workplace bullying have experienced humiliation and have been harmed and controlled by their own perpetrators, damage which has triggered anger and instilled a need in them for revenge. Their experiences would later serve as a justification of their own bullying behaviour (Rivers et al., 2009). And even though it is obvious that aggressive behaviour causes so much pain to others the cycle of violence can be perpetuated from one generation to the next (Denmark & Williams, 2013). Studies show that perpetrators of bullying have repeatedly reported that they were not aware of the consequences of their behaviour (Jenkins et al., 2010).

Further, workplace bullies have been found to have high levels of social anxiety, and low levels of social competence and self-esteem (Crashaw, 2012). Meanwhile perpetrators usually claimed to have low levels of anxiety or insecurity, or, roughly speaking, average levels of such dimensions (Chaplin, 2010). However, social rejection is positively associated with anxiety or insecurity (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2007).

Nonetheless, in case anxiety takes hold of the bully, they will fear a return of their projections onto their target and as the victim cannot be trusted to hold onto these projections, the bully will find that the victim needs to be controlled and monitored. The bully, unable to reflect on these feelings, becomes preoccupied with their perceptions and believes the target to become the aggressor (Crashaw, 2012). Limited self-reflection and perspective might be the significant precursors to workplace bullying and seen as powerful factors that cause individuals to become bullies.

Bullying, and the players in the dynamic, make up for extremely complex sets of variables, of which the personal factors of the bullying perpetrator is just one dimension (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2007). Research on the relationship between personal factors, such as lack of social competence, and workplace bullying conclude that the personal factors of the bully clearly relate to bullying behaviour in the workplace and may further enlighten the bully’s motives (Hidzir et al., 2017; Zapf & Einarsen, 2011).

### **The bully’s target**

The reasons why an individual is “chosen” by the bully to become their target for attack is multilayered, but mostly appears to be directed at the person’s personality. At first the bully may focus on and pursue those who are sensitive, display quite high levels of empathic awareness, and provoke envy in the bully.

The bully may begrudge professional knowledge, education, intellect, social standing in their target and feel resentment and bitterness towards them. They may even be jealous of the target's looks, relationships, and material possessions. In the meantime, the target is initially blissfully unaware but may through time become conscious of a change in atmosphere in the office. For instance, "by accident" being left out of a list of invitees to a meeting, "forgotten" to be included in an invitation to a social gathering, a "joke" or comment directed at the target who cannot determine whether it was said in jest or was meant to be serious. A look, rolling of the eyes, a disapproving grunt, a dismissive gesture are further examples of covert bullying not immediately translated by a target as being bullied but still being interpreted as unpleasant behaviour. These actions may unfortunately soon unfold into more serious confrontations and the target may have difficulty in interpreting the malice directed at them. As bullying behaviour is insidious, at first mostly invisible for colleagues, the target may now slide into becoming a victim, who feels powerless and passive in the face of perceived unfounded ill-treatment.

### **Becoming a Victim**

Opinions are divided among researchers about the influence of an individual's personality on being defenceless in connection with conflict behaviour in the workplace. Any employee in any organisation can become a target of conflict behaviour at work which in turn can evolve into a serious case of bullying. An observation already recognised by Einarsen (1999) and before him by Thylefors (1987).

It may be difficult to define how or why, once targeted, an individual becomes a "victim" of bullying. A "victim" may be a product of their own childhood experiences and someone who finds it hard to withstand negative, intrusive, and aggressive behaviour of bullies or who may be uncomfortable with conflict, including in the workplace. Children who have been growing up with overprotective parents for instance may well have been too shielded to develop adequate strategies to withstand the psychological attacks of a bully. Others who have grown up in families where there is parental conflict will have learned defensive ways to avoid conflict, even blaming themselves since this offers the position of control and the hope of resolving the problem. Earlier research on the targets of bullying implied for instance that employees who had been exposed to bullying at work were oversensitive, suspicious, blamed others and were more resentful and angrier (Gandolfo, 1995) and were less likeable and understanding (Glasø et al., 2007; Lind et al., 2009).

In general, the bully will very quickly catch sight of those who feel vulnerable due to the situation they find themselves in, and which will weaken their resilience. Their vulnerability may be a result of temporary psychological trauma such as loss of a loved one, or a physical illness. It may be due to longer term psychological issues such as depression or stress-related problems in their personal or working lives, including being subject to discrimination of various kinds, be it racial, religious, sexual, or through age or disability. However, being of a passive, anxious and perhaps accommodating and

subservient disposition may well show a level of insecurity that may “appeal” to the potential bully. Identifying their target, the bully’s focus moves from being predatory to becoming a persecutor.

In other words, there may be a plethora of reasons why an individual is singled out and targeted for bullying treatment, as bullying behaviour often starts subtly, and its underhand nature may be lost on those who are not by nature familiar with bullying behaviour and from the onset find it hard to identify (Tye-Williams & Krone, 2014), and therefore, become easy “fodder” for the bully. Some of those targeted may be oblivious to insidious behaviour directed at them because they are simply too busy with their work (Crashaw, 2012).

As is also evident in several of the narratives of those profiled in Part II, that people have in general great difficulty putting their experiences of workplace bullying into a coherent and understandable narrative that makes sense to the listener (Tye-Williams & Krone, 2014). Victims’ stories often have no clear beginning, middle, and end, a handicap which at first did manifest itself quite clearly in Catherine’s and Stephanie’s stories and their accounts had to be put into a more flowing order to make sense. Most people would start their story by saying, “it all sounds so petty... so insignificant”. Timing is of the essence, when and how the victim relates their story, and this, Tye-Williams remarks, will make a significant difference in whether the listener will believe the victim or not. If the story appears not to make sense, is fragmented and incoherent, people may not believe the victim. If not believed, the victim may feel even more isolated and incapable of relating their story. Their recovery process will last longer, they may suffer from anxiety, depression, and in a worse-case scenario contemplate taking their own life. It stands to reason when being in an extreme emotional state, as victims of bullying often are, that the ability to think rationally has decreased to a level that they are barely able to function, and they cannot find the words to describe their bewilderment. However, if a target is aware of the bully’s tactics and they are supported by colleagues and management, underpinned by effective organisational policies and procedures to make complaints a viable way of taking the bully to task, destructive consequences can be kept to a minimum or even be avoided (Karatuna, 2015). Conversely, the situation will intensify when the organisational powers do not adhere to their policies and procedures and ignore a victim’s complaints, concerns, and even grievances, in the process victimizing them further and escalating the bullying.