

Time to rethink 'the bully' in bullying? Yes! But how?

Report from the 2017 IAWBH summer school



By Ria Deakin

The IAWBH 2017 Summer School took place on the 26th, 27th and 28th July and, in line with the British summer, the weather was, for the most part rather dull and wet... Thankfully, however, the weather didn't serve to dampen spirits or debate, resulting in a lively and engaging event. Over the three days,

there were 10 speakers, enjoyed by around 35 academics and practitioners from a variety of different countries.

Our speakers posed and addressed a number of interesting – and at times controversial – propositions around our core focus of considering the (in)adequacies of current approaches to dealing with 'the bully'.

On the first day, Laura Crawshaw, PhD, (Boss Whispering Institute) considered how perspectives on perpetrators may be classified, for example as criminal or clueless, and how these differing perspectives influence the in-



Laura Crawshaw



Ruth Brenner

terventions chosen. Ruth Brenner Unger (BullyingUK) offered suggestions around the similarities and differences between the nature and responses to school and workplace bullying. There was also an energetic panel discussion between Katherine Graham (CMP Resolutions) and Bill Adams (Trade Unions Congress (Yorkshire and Humber)), about the strengths and weaknesses of current approaches to dealing with bullies and bullying.



Miwako Wakui

On the second day, Miwako Wakui (Office Prism LLC) provided insight into the role of toxic cultures in facilitating and perpetuating 'power harassment' in Japan; followed by Evelyn Field, OAM, who drew assistance from the animal kingdom to illustrate her discussion evaluating the ways we currently classify and explain bullies and bullying behaviour, and the way individuals and organisations respond to bullying.

We then moved into a series of parallel workshop sessions and tough choices were made about where to go! Neill Thompson (Northumbria University), spoke about an innovative approach of using video to analyse the language those accused of bullying use to help us better understand the perspective of 'bullies'; while in the room next door, Dr Sheila White (Birkbeck, University of London), delivered a workshop introducing the value of adopting a psychodynamic approach to bullies. In the last slots of the day, Laura Crawshaw spoke further about what it takes to change abrasive leaders and the essential role an employer plays; while Anne Lee (Oxford University) spoke about the challenges of dealing with bullies in toxic cultures, especially in situations where there was a question over who had the authority and responsibility to address it.

The last day saw Dr Karen Niven, University of Manchester speak about the role of third parties in bullying, suggesting the potentially contentious proposition that failure on the part of third-party bystanders to intervene may lead to them being considered as 'bullies by proxy'.



Karen Niven

The purpose of the Summer School was to explore the question: Is it time to rethink the 'bully' in bullying? The relatively small number of delegates allowed us to seize the opportunity to have in-depth discussions around the complexities and nuances involved in answering this question. The programme was therefore designed to facilitate understanding and learning not only through key note presentations and workshops, but also through 'collaborative dialogue'. Collaborative dialogue encourages debate and the exploration of contradictions and opposing perspectives and experiences through respectful and shared discussion – and there was certainly plenty of that!

The willingness to question and converse was evident, not only in response to the various speakers, with some fantastic debates emerging from the post-talk question and answer opportunities, but also through the use of World Cafés. At the Summer School we had two World Café sessions – one on the first day to identify the issues, and one on the last day to crystallise thoughts about the way forward.



The first Café posed the question: To what extent to do you think it is necessary to rethink 'the bully' in bullying? Here the consensus was that it was, indeed, necessary to rethink 'the bul-

ly' in bullying. Key themes in the discussions were that it's not so much a need to rethink, but a need to address it in the first place; conceptual and practical ambiguity over the word 'bully'; uncertainty over the effectiveness of policies; and the need to recognise the role played by an organisation. Given the problems, we also discussed who, or what, is a bully. This led to conversations over the importance of the nature and extent of harm, the role of organisational actions, and the need to move away from a focus on personality traits.



In light of the preceding presentations, workshops and discussions, the Summer School closed with a second Café. These discussions began by asking: Should we stop using the terms 'bully' and bullying? If yes, what are the alternatives? There was a great deal of debate in

relation to the question, with some strong views that we should indeed stop using the term 'bully' in relation to workplace bullying due to its connotations with school and children, rather than adults. In contrast to this, others felt its familiarity provided a way for individuals to help understand their experiences. Some alternatives were suggested, including 'workplace mistreat-





ment'. There was an interesting discussion around the adequacy and utility of alternative terms, for example in facilitating research access to organizations, and in providing a common language across cultural and disciplinary contexts.

Given the persistent challenges, the next question asked what the three biggest weaknesses in current understandings and approaches to dealing with 'bullies' and bullying are, and what could be done to overcome these. Here the weaknesses focused around the dominance of quantitative, rather than qualitative methodologies in bullying research; too great a focus on bullying as an individual, rather than collective problem; and organizational perceptions of bullying. Approaches for dealing with these included embracing more qualitative research and insight, and recognizing the role of the organization in the bullying dynamic, as well as interpersonal dimensions.

Finally, with a view to future action, we finished by considered where we, as researchers and practitioner could go from here. There were some great, proactive and practically-focused suggestions, for example around ways to try and facilitate collaboration and partnership between academics and practitioners, and how the IAWBH may be able to facilitate this. Other ideas included the need for more narrative research, particularly from the perpetrator perspective.

Just in case that wasn't quite enough, on the Wednesday evening we also had a bullying-themed film and tv clip evening at the nearby Lawrence Batley Theatre where we discussed the portrayal of bullies in popular culture. This was followed on Thursday by a relaxed evening of tapas and drinks at a lovely local restaurant and bar, The Corner.

We had a few challenges along the way but on behalf of myself and Frances, we would like to say thank you to all those who supported the Summer School along the way and during the event itself. A special thank you also goes to those who came along, whether to present, host a workshop and/or just to attend. It was a risk to make the programme so dependent on participation and contributions from delegates but we couldn't have asked for a better group, and were absolutely thrilled with how it turned out.



Ria Deakin