

# **Budgetary Bullying**

by

***Peter Armstrong***

***Professor Emeritus***

***The School of Management***

***University of Leicester***

Address for Correspondence:

The School of Management

University of Leicester

Leicester LE1 7RH

UK

E-mail [p.armstrong@le.ac.uk](mailto:p.armstrong@le.ac.uk)

## Abstract

This paper seeks to connect two literatures: that on workplace bullying and that on the behavioural aspects of budgeting. It proposes to do so by suggesting extensions to both literatures

Arising from prescriptive concerns to recommend effective managerial approaches to the budgetary process, the general tendency in the literature of behavioural accounting has been to treat the matter of target-setting and the manner of acting on budgetary reports as independent variables, both of which are taken to influence performance as the dependent variable. Reasonable in its own terms, the unintended consequence has been a neglect of the capacity of budgetary controls to highlight variations in the cost-effectiveness with which individuals perform their work and so present opportunities for managerial bullying.

The literature on workplace bullying (aka incivility, aggression, social undermining or mobbing) has been similarly inflected by its prescriptive origins. The need to enlist allies in the fight against workplace bullying has led to its depiction as a decontextualised pathology, rather than a tendency to which managers are particularly prone. Similarly the need to detach bullying from the 'normal' pressures of management-by-exception has led to definitions which incorporate notions of individual victimisation and of its repetition over long periods of time.

Using case material on a medium-sized shoe and slipper factory dating from 1978, this paper suggests that a comprehensive approach to workplace bullying needs to challenge these definitions. In particular it is important to recognise that there may be a collective dimension to bullying in the sense that an entire workforce can become its subject. In this scenario, sporadic and single-incident acts of aggression which fall outside the orthodox definitions of bullying have the effect of building up a kind of 'fear capital' (c.f. Bourdieu, 1984) such that the mere presence of the manager concerned, or even the prospect of that presence is accompanied by all the signs of psychological distress associated with more persistent forms of bullying.

The paper further suggests that budgetary targets and information offer a highly effective means of achieving and maintaining the psychological ascendancy of the bullying manager over the bullied workforce: this because of their apparent mechanical connection with the employer's interest in the continuance of the employment relationship. In the case study company that interest translated into the question of survival in the face of imports from the 'Third Italy' and from South East Asia, thereby lending force to the practice of budget-based bullying. In this last respect, the increasingly globalized product markets which have characterised the last three decades have rendered the thirty-year old fieldwork on which the paper is based only too relevant.

**Keywords:** Accounting, Budgetary Control, Bullying, Global Competition, Ethnography

## Budgets and the Bullied Workforce

In the office in which I work, there are four people of whom I am afraid. Each of these four people is afraid of five people.

Joseph Heller *Something Happened*

### ***Intimations of Bullying in Behavioural Accounting***

Quite early in the literature of behavioural accounting, there were intimations that there might be a link between budgetary control and managerial bullying. Hopwood (1973, 1976) observed of his 'budget-constrained' style of management that it was associated with widespread tension and worry on the part of subordinates, and with beliefs that performance evaluations were unjust. As he put it, 'frantic and, at times, unsuccessful attempts [to keep out of the red] only resulted in more problems, more tension and more worry' (1976 pp. 111-4).

In respect of the sustained nature of its pressures and of their stressful effects, budget constrained management as it is described by Hopwood seems to fit quite well with the definitions of workplace bullying prevalent in the literature. In other respects the fit is not so good. Typically, bullying has been thought of as a pattern of repeated victimisation in which individuals are arbitrarily singled out for mistreatment over a considerable period (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf and Cooper, 2003a, p. 13; Rayner, Hoel and Cooper, 2002, p. 11). Defining bullying in this manner would tend to rule out any systematic connection with budgetary control. Notwithstanding the complaints of injustice recorded by Hopwood, *arbitrary* victimisation is almost the antithesis of its supposed rationality and impersonality. And yet, given that research on workplace bullying originated in concerns over its psychological and physical impacts, it seems anomalous to exclude stressors simply on the grounds that they are applied according to some managerial standard of equity and for a managerial purpose which, in itself, may be regarded as legitimate. Research by Liefvooghe and Mackenzie-Davey, moreover, suggests that employees regard the practice of confronting individuals with statistics on their performance as a form of bullying (2001, p. 382). If there is to be a re-examination of the possible connections between budgetary control and workplace bullying, therefore, the definitional exclusion of this kind of pressure needs to be queried. In the next section, it will be suggested that they have been inherited from the activist origins of the literature and are sustained by data-gathering practices also inherited from anti-bullying campaigns.

Turning to the literature on budgetary control, a few years after Hopwood's early pointer, the possible connections between bullying and the budget-constrained style of management were occluded in a 'Foucaultian Turn', largely initiated by Hopwood himself (1987). Whilst the recourse to Foucault need not, in itself, have deflected attention from individual variations in the use of accounting information, the particular writings which were imported into accounting research, and the manner in which these were interpreted, certainly did so. Influenced by *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972) and *Discipline and Punish* (1979), accounting systems were depicted as regimes of power-knowledge constitutive of the subjectivities of those involved, a theorization which left little scope for human agency in general (Newton, 1998, Reed, 2000) and individual styles of management in particular. The alternative

possibility - that bullying might be institutionalized in particular settings - was similarly excluded by a tendency to seize on Foucault's remarks on the 'productive' nature of power (Foucault, 1980, p. 119) to the neglect of his observations on its 'brutality' (ibid, p. 95, see, for example, Knights and Morgan, 1991, p. 269, Miller and O'Leary, 1987, pp. 261-2). If it is true that all power is productive, then so is that of the bully. If only disciplinary power is productive, then so is that bullying which is inflicted in the name of discipline. Either way, a resurrection of the issue of budget-based bullying would seem to depend on a reversion to traditional action frames of reference (Silverman, 1970, Ch. 6). If subjects are required to assume the burden of responsibility, they must be granted the courtesy of agency.

### ***The Activist Definition of Bullying – its Strengths and Limitations***

The interest of UK academics in workplace bullying was triggered off by the work of the journalist Andrea Adams (Lee, 2000, p. 594-5; Rayner et al, 2002, p. 2). In 1988, Adams learnt of a bank near her home in which an entire department was being terrorised by its manager. After verifying the story, Adams took part in a BBC Radio 4 programme which evoked a massive response. Thus encouraged, she produced the best-seller *Bullying at Work: How to Confront and Overcome It* in collaboration with Neil Crawford (Adams, 1992). Following Adams' untimely death from cancer in 1995, the Andrea Adams Trust was set up in 1996 to continue her campaign. Amongst many other activities, it offers advice to those who have experienced bullying in the workplace and has co-sponsored a number of surveys on the topic (<http://www.andreaadamstrust.org/> last accessed 10<sup>th</sup> June 2009).

These activist origins – which have their counterparts in Australian, Irish and Swedish traditions of research (Sheehan, Barker and Rayner, 1999) - have been consequential for the manner in which bullying has most frequently been conceptualised and studied. With some exceptions, it has been taken that:

1. Bullying is essentially the same problem whether perpetrated by managers on subordinates, by organizational peers or by subordinates on managers.
2. Bullying involves the singling-out and victimisation of individuals or, at most, of small groups
3. Bullying consists of repeated acts of victimisation which take place over a considerable period of time
4. As with sexual harassment, bullying is defined not by the intentions of the perpetrator but by the perceptions of its victims and its effects upon them
5. Bullying is characterised by an imbalance of power such that bullied persons have difficulty in defending themselves. This imbalance of power need not be based on institutional position.

(Rayner et al 2002, pp. 9-16; Einarsen et al 2003a p. 15)

Items 4 and 5 are entirely compatible with the treatment of budgetary bullying proposed in this paper and they will not be subject to detailed examination. Since budgetary control is specifically a management technique, any connection it might have with bullying requires a re-examination of the context-independence of bullying assumed in item 1. The same is true of items 2 and 3 since they imply that budgetary control, and for that matter any other impersonal system of administration, can only

serve as an instrument of bullying through a perversion of its operation and purpose. These definitional exclusions are reconsidered in the three sections which follow.

## 1. On the Specificity of Managerial Bullying

‘You haven’t got the fear nowadays. You can’t really have discipline without that.’

(Overheard remark from one manager to another. ‘Lancashire Electrical Fittings’. Armstrong, Goodman and Hyman, 1981, p. 70)

Single-issue activism, like all short-range politics, is the art of the possible and anti-bullying campaigns are no exception. Prioritising the immediate relief of suffering over any challenge to the social fundamentals which might lie behind it, the activist seeks to achieve her or his objectives by working with and through existing structures of power. In the absence of legislation – and possibly even in its presence – workplace bullying can only be tackled with the co-operation of senior managements and/or human resource departments and this means identifying the problem in ways which they find congenial. This being the case, it is important for the activist to avoid any suggestion that bullying – or even a tendency to bully – is inherent in the very nature of managerial prerogatives (though see Ironside and Seifert, 2003 for a critique of this point of view from an industrial relations perspective). To this end, bullying is framed as a pathological form of dyadic relationship, independent of the structural relationship of the parties involved (parties which may each consist of a number of individuals). In this manner that the Andrea Adams Trust can dedicate itself to the eradication of workplace bullying whilst simultaneously claiming that ‘We don’t take sides’ (<http://www.andreaadamstrust.org/> last accessed 10<sup>th</sup> June 2009). It is this decontextualised concept of bullying which has carried into the bulk of the literature (Einarsen et al 2003a p. 15, Hoel and Cooper, 2001 pp. 4-5, though see Einarsen, 1999, p. 19 for a note of caution). Research on bullying under the alternative label of ‘mobbing’ (Zapf, 1999) would appear to take this tendency even further. Since the term in English carries connotations of the harassment of an individual by a number of perpetrators, ‘mobbing’ would appear to direct attention away from managerial bullying altogether, though Zapf himself does not use the term in this exclusionary manner (Beale, 2001, p. 78, Hoel and Beale, 2006, p. 243).

The major bodies of work to treat managerial bullying as a phenomenon *sui generis* have been Tepper’s work on ‘abusive supervision’ (Tepper, 2000, Tepper, Duffy, Henle and Schurer-Lambert, 2006) and Ashforth’s on ‘petty tyranny’ (Ashforth, 1994, 2007). In these cases the ideological sting of associating bullying with management is partially neutralized by definitions and operationalisations which emphasise the abnormality of abusive supervision (‘How often does your supervisor ridicule you, tell you your thoughts and feeling are stupid’ and so on) and by an emphasis – not entirely convincing on close examination – on its operational and economic dysfunctionality (Tepper, 2000). It may be too that Tepper’s terminology (abusive *supervision*) is intended to suggest that abuse is typically perpetrated by first-line supervisors rather than by those who think of themselves as managers proper.

From the analytic point of view, there are good reasons for insisting on the specificity of managerial bullying. Firstly, most of the workplace bullying reported in surveys is in fact performed by managers, varying from about 50% of reported instances in Scandinavian research to about 80% in the UK (Rayner et al, 2002, p. 65-6). Given that subordinates outnumber managers many times to one, these figures are incontrovertible evidence that managers are far more likely to bully than are

colleagues or subordinates. The difference between the Scandinavian and UK figures also suggests that the *kind* of management makes a difference with the greater propensity to bully being associated with the greater 'power distance' between managers and workers characteristic of Anglo Saxon versions of capitalism, as compared to the Nordic (Rayner et al, 2002, pp. 67-8).

Secondly there is a case to be made that 'bullying [is] a basic part of the management of labour, and that most of its forms are accepted as part of the daily experience of employed work' (Ironsides and Seifert, 2003, p. 386). On this view, a certain intensity of bullying is regarded as legitimate management practice (Lee, 2000, p. 597) or as 'personnel work by other means' (Zapf and Warth, 1997, quoted in Salin, 2003, p. 1224). This implies that bullying only surfaces as an issue when it exceeds broader societal norms of what is acceptable. Where this occurs, researchers and other external observers begin to talk of a 'bullying organization' in which managerial culture is pervaded by a sense of 'permission to harass' (Archer, 1999; Beale, 2001, p. 83; Rayner et al, 2002, p. 187-8; Brodsky 1976, p. 84, cited in Keashly and Jagatic 2003, p. 51). To speak of organization as the *agent* of bullying, however, as do Liefvooghe and Mackenzie-Davey (2001, p. 383), is a step too far. If the refusal of overtime to call-centre employees who fail to meet performance targets constitutes bullying (to quote one of their examples), it is a form of bullying by proxy set in motion by whoever decided that this should be the case, not bullying by an hypostasised 'organization'.

A third way in which managerial bullying differs from that by colleagues and subordinates is that it can be accomplished through discretionary powers which are simply not available to non-managers. For example, Lee (2002) found that the annual staff appraisal for performance-related pay, as conducted by Civil Service line managers, was routinely used as an occasion for bullying. The most familiar area of managerial discretion, however, is the deployment of labour. Leaving aside individual acts of 'collegiate' sabotage, 'changing the victim's tasks in some negative way or making them difficult to perform' (Zapf 1999, quoted in Einarsen et al 2003a, p. 9) would appear to be a form of workplace bullying routinely available only to managers. As well as substantive 'work practice bullying' (Liefvooghe and Mackenzie Davey, 2001, p. 380), the discretionary powers available to managers make it possible for them to practice a kind of procedural bullying in which subordinates are repeatedly reminded of the manager's power to make their work more unpleasant (Hutchinson, Vickers, Jackson and Lesley, 2005 p. 333). Because these managerial prerogatives are also legitimised by widely accepted vocabularies of motive, however, the intentions behind acts which are perceived as managerial bullying may be extremely variable. There need be no victimising intent, and even where there is, there may be an instrumental rather than an affective motive behind it (Einarsen et al (2003a p. 12). It may, for example, be intended to bring a recalcitrant employee to heel, or to discourage recalcitrance in others by demonstrating its consequences. From this it follows that the managerial bully need manifest none of the fragile self-esteem or deficiencies of social competence which researchers have identified in other bullies (Zapf and Einarsen, 2003, pp. 168-173). Two incidents from the fieldwork to be reported will illustrate the complex and elusive nature of the motives which may lie behind managerial bullying.

In the machining room of 'Moulded Footwear Ltd.' (MoFoL), the manager had moved one of the girls<sup>1</sup> to a new machine for the obvious reason from his point of view that the departmental output needed production from that machine. The girl herself sat at the new machine in tears, upset that she and not others had been moved and that her piecework earnings would be hit in consequence. When a sympathetic forelady tried to intervene on her behalf, the manager's response was, 'No, don't move her back. Let her sit there all morning if you have to – she's just being awkward.'

(Armstrong et al, 1981, p. 81, supplemented by contemporary field notes.

There is no question, surely, that the 'girl' concerned felt herself to have been unfairly singled out, that the manager had 'negatively affect[ed] someone's work tasks' (Einarsen et al, 2003a, p. 15) and that this had caused emotional distress. Apart from the fact that the incident was a one-off rather than a repeated pattern of behaviour – a matter which will be taken up in a moment – those features would define the act as one of bullying. Most managers, of course, would dispute any such interpretation. With MoFoL's Machining Room Manager, they would regard it as a straightforward exercise of the managerial right to deploy labour according to their view of the requirements of the task. In fact this particular refusal to allow the girl back onto her 'own' work appeared to have the maintenance of this right behind it as a point of principle, being calculated to disrupt the development of any notion of customary rights to particular tasks. 'There's no such thing as "my work" in this place', as another manager put it on another occasion - and such exemplary demonstrations that this would continue to be the case were not unusual. Thus redeployments which are experienced as managerial bullying are distinctive in that they may be seen by their perpetrators as incidental to 'getting the job done' (Lawrence, 2001, p. 69; Rayner et al, 2002, p. 118) or, with a greater degree of intentionality, as a re-assertion of the generalized dominance necessary to hold in place the frontier of control (Goodrich, 1920; Lawrence, 2001, p. 70).

The following incident took place during the same research, but in 'Lancashire Electrical Fittings' rather than MoFoL. In this case, the manager's overt aim was to enforce an expansion of the operatives' tasks. Bullying – and a certain sadistic malice - entered the process when the one man who initially refused to perform the additional work was held for a considerable time in a state of limbo, uncertain as to whether or not his initial refusal had cost him his job. Rhetorically speaking, the incident was complex. Firstly the manager ('Clive') justified the imposition of the extra work by representing himself as the purchaser of a service which he was entitled to have properly done. Secondly, the temporary (and unofficial) 'suspension' of the operative who resisted appeared to be a charade intended as a public demonstration of the futility of opposition:

Hitherto, batches of mouldings rejected as containing a proportion of scrap had been sorted by the women who worked on the mould-finishing line. But since Clive, the manager, had substantially cut manning levels on this line ('he gets a feather in his cap for doing that'), this was becoming impossible. Accordingly, he now demanded that the men who operated the moulding

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<sup>1</sup> This was the East Manchester term for adult female workers current at the time of the fieldwork. In the interests of ethnographic authenticity it has been retained throughout

machines should sort their own scrap. This is how he put it to the one who initially refused:

‘Look, if you were to take your motor to be serviced, you’d want it done right, wouldn’t you, or else you wouldn’t pay? Well, it’s the same with me. It’s no use you telling me, “I’ve done these mouldings. They’re no good, but I still want paying for them.” Oh, no. If I’m paying for them, I want them done right.’

Clive then made an ostentatious play of refusing to have any more dealings with the operative or even speak to him because he had ‘refused a legitimate order’. Taking the line that the man had ‘dismissed himself’, he insisted that ‘He doesn’t work for me any more and I don’t speak to people who don’t work for me’. It was only after the shop steward’s intervention that the man was allowed to return to his job – which now included the sorting of scrap.

(Armstrong et al, 1981, p. 72-3, supplemented by contemporary field notes)

This incident also illustrates why anti-bullying campaigners, like those concerned with sexual harassment, prefer to define bullying solely in terms of the perceptions of the target, rather than the intentions of the perpetrator, a lead which has been followed by many academics working in the field (Beale, 2001). Clive’s motives in the foregoing exchange were difficult to disentangle. At times he appeared to be play-acting, but if that was the case, he was doing so in a manner which could have become serious at any moment, had he been challenged on his operative’s self-dismissal. Interestingly, such ambiguity of intent, a kind of deniable aggression, has been incorporated into Andersson and Pearson’s definition of ‘workplace incivility’ (1999, cited in Keashly and Jagatic, 2003, p. 33).

## **2 Bullying as Rational Administration**

The case which triggered off Andrea Adams’ interest in bullying at work was that of a departmental manager in a local bank who was in the habit of terrorising an entire workforce. The stories which flooded in after her radio programme, however, were of individual experiences, most of which involved repeated and persistent victimisation. The result was a certain irony. Concerns originating in a case of generalised bullying, collectively experienced, were deflected into a campaign which defined bullying in terms individual of experiences of discriminatory ill-treatment .

For the activist, there are advantages in defining bullying in such terms. Firstly it links bullying to the violation of norms of distributive justice as between worker and worker (Tepper, 2000). Since these are norms to which senior managements might be expected to subscribe – in public at least - there is the prospect of gaining their support for the eradication of bullying so defined. Secondly an individualized conception of bullying leads naturally to a casework approach, and one which proposes to deal with particular instances of bullying by restoring ‘fairness’. Far from threatening to disturb the prevailing routines of a workplace, such an approach promises to re-establish them, and in this respect, it can represent itself as a service to managements.

As with the decontextualizing tendency, the idea of bullying as victimization has been taken into most academic approaches, with the consequence that harsh or demeaning treatment which is dispensed according to some managerial notion of equity tends to be excluded from the concept of bullying (Einarsen et al, 2003a, p. 7,



though see Liefvooghe and Mackenzie-Davey, 2001, pp. 381-3 for an exception). This is the case even though the effects of this depersonalised and rationally administered form of bullying might be qualitatively indistinguishable from those caused by discriminatory ill-treatment. It is true that there are survey findings by Tepper (2000) which indicate that a sense of injustice intensifies the adverse effects of abusive supervision, but that does not mean that such effects are absent from 'fairly' distributed abuse, such as which might follow, for instance, from failures to meet budgetary targets. In this respect, a managerial folk-saying of the period, as repeated by the manager who featured in the above vignette is illuminating: 'I'm a nasty bastard, me, but they know they'll get a fair deal.' Fairly distributed nastiness, it is being said here, might be fair but is still nasty.

The case for recognising rationally applied 'negative acts' as a form of bullying is reinforced by survey findings on the stressful effects of bullying on those who witness it. These are broadly similar to those of bullying personally experienced, but they also include fear that the witnesses themselves might be next, frustration at their inability to help the targets and anger at 'the organization' for failing to prevent the bullying (Lawrence, 2001, p. 73; Keashly and Jagatic, 2003, p. 56). Whether intended or not, this means that there is an exemplary quality to rationally-distributed bullying which establishes its perpetrator as a generally-recognised object of fear.

### **3 Sporadic and Single-Episode Bullying**

Perhaps the most persuasive argument against restricting the definition of bullying to sustained harassment is that such a restriction is contested by people who have been subject to single episodes of traumatic ill-treatment (Lee, 2000 p. 606). On a strict interpretation, the exclusion of such cases – and Lee presents a number of examples – would mean that the victims of those bullying managers who take care to distribute their acts of aggression would receive no help from anti-bullying initiatives.

There is also a case to be made for the recognition of sporadic and single-episode bullying from a consideration of the psychological effects attributed to bullying in its more sustained forms. Research on these latter has uncovered symptoms similar to those of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a syndrome originally identified in the victims of one-off life-threatening events. These include the re-experiencing of the trauma, the avoidance of related stimuli, a general numbing of responsiveness, hyper-arousal, difficulties in concentration, tense and irritable behaviour, and exaggerated reactions to unexpected stimuli (Scott and Stradling, 2001, pp. 33-4; Keashly and Jagatic, 2003, p. 53; Einarsen and Mikkelsen, 2003 pp. 131-3). That symptoms of this kind have been found in the victims of stressors of relatively low intensity has been attributed in the literature to the cumulative effects of their repetition (Einarsen, 1999, p. 18). It seems illogical, however, to insist on repetition when its symptoms were originally associated with single intense experiences. If one is ultimately interested in the effects of bullying on its victims, there seems to be no good reason for excluding one-off events provided they are of sufficiently intensity.

There is also a case to be made through a critique of the methods used in empirical research. Possibly without intending to do so, most researchers have collected their data by methods which replicate the spontaneous response to Andrea Adams' radio programme. Sometimes the similarity is obvious, as with those researchers who have approached bullied individuals for accounts of their personal experiences (Blase and Blase, 2002). In other cases, it is less so, as with questionnaire surveys which have

required their respondents to code their experiences into replies to forced-choice questions (e.g. Tepper, 2000, Hoel and Cooper, 2000, Quine, 1999). Given that the symptoms of bullying have been shown to persist for at least a year after its cessation (Matthiesen and Einarsen (2004) and that these include a tendency to re-experience the trauma, it is arguable that any methods which rely entirely on the accounts of victims (Rayner et al, 2002, p. 68) - will tend to represent bullying as characterised by repetition and persistence. Once a perpetrator has become established as a bully in the mind of the victim, the symptoms of PTSD as itemised above suggest that they will continue to be so perceived, almost irrespective of their actual behaviour. It is not for a moment suggested that the events which trigger these experiences of repetition would never be apparent to an outside observer, still less that the experiences themselves are illusory. The point, rather, is one frequently made of the victims of serious assaults: that the trauma is re-experienced and even intensified by further social contact with the perpetrator, however innocent that contact may outwardly appear. Further contact, of course, will be the normal case with managerial bullying.

Once institutionalised in academic research, definitions of bullying which insist on repetition and duration become self-confirming because single-instance bullying is excluded from subsequent datasets as an irrelevance. Hoel and Cooper (2000), for example, prefaced their questionnaire survey with a definition of bullying which included the qualifying characteristics of repetition and persistence whilst Quine (1999) asked respondents whether or not they had been *persistently* subjected to a range of bullying behaviours during the last 12 months. Qualitative researchers have used similar procedures: in collecting their narratives of bullying, Blase and Blase (2002) specifically excluded cases in which the ill-treatment had not been long-term .

The consequence of this exclusion of single-instance and sporadic bullying is that much managerial bullying and budget-related bullying in particular is defined out of existence, since it may not be consistently directed at particular individuals but rather at whichever individuals are flagged up by budgetary reports.

In partial endorsement of the foregoing arguments, it appears that Rayner et al themselves are not entirely comfortable with the insistence on repetition and duration as defining characteristics bullying:

Consider the person who has very few bullying experiences to report, or perhaps just one. They may have been very frightened by a single experience, or they may be obsessed by it and rehearse it over and over in their minds, so that they effectively experience it several times. Would these people be seen to be bullying themselves? Our notions of persistency certainly do not include such self-repetition or rehearsal and additional work is needed which may provide further insight into the dynamics of how the conflict escalates.’

Rayner et al., 2002, p. 127

Unusual in academic research, and entirely laudable, this self interrogation seems to point towards a recognition of single-episode bullying

## **The Case Study**

The ethnographic research on which this paper is based was carried out by the writer in 1978 as part of an ESRC funded research under the direction of Professor John Goodman. Aspects the study have been previously reported in Armstrong, Goodman and Hyman (1981), Armstrong (1983) and Armstrong (1989).

Moulded Footwear Limited (MoFoL) was a small shoe and slipper factory which employed about 300 people, about two thirds of whom were female. Even at that time, many UK companies in the industry were succumbing to low cost competition from the 'Third Italy' and South East Asia. The need to compete with these sources for large orders from UK's monopsonistic retail chains placed MoFoL in a precarious position. These customers' insistence on high quality at low prices had consequences both for the characteristics of MoFoL's management and its treatment of labour. Taking the view that supervision at the level of the production shop was essentially 'unproductive', senior management's priority was to fill these positions at the least possible cost. As a result, most of MoFoL's junior managers had been promoted from the shopfloor ('failed pieceworkers' as one shop steward put it) and formal qualifications of any kind were thin on the ground. The industry, and even firm-specific, nature of such human capital as they possessed, coupled with an awareness of the low value which senior management placed on their services meant that MoFoL's supervisors and shop managers were extremely insecure and correspondingly susceptible to any pressure from senior management. The same applied to the workforce. Though MoFoL was unionised under a national agreement, shopfloor organization was weak, as evidenced by the routine denial of rights which workers formally possessed under various national agreements (examples of this will be given later). By the standards of the Post-Donovan (1968) model of good industrial relations, MoFoL's treatment of its workers can reasonably be described as harsh, the instances of bullying to be described presently being distinguished only in respect of standing out from a general level of 'workplace incivility' (c.f. p. 8). The majority of MoFoL's managers shared this perception; the personnel/training manager, for example, confided that the company was a 'regular' at industrial tribunals.

Even in the late 1970s, these characteristics made MoFoL an unusual site for an intensive ethnographic research, though paradoxically, they also contribute to its contemporary relevance. Generally speaking, access of this kind is the product of some managerial belief in the possible contribution of academic research to some practical problem or, more altruistically, that the workplace concerned offers a model of good practice from which others might learn. Though Mr. John, MoFoL's managing director, did indeed believe that there were lessons to be learnt from MoFoL's 'family atmosphere' – hence the access - he was probably the only one who saw the company in this light. Everybody else was keenly aware that the company was engaged in a struggle for survival in which their own positions and rights as employees were under pressure and likely to be sacrificed altogether. MoFoL, therefore, was representative at the time of what might be called the hidden underbelly of British employment relations, of what was happening away from the 'interesting' developments in managerial technique, organizational cultures and employee 'empowerment' which are the normal subjects of research.

Since the late 1970s, of course, many more UK industries have found themselves on the same trajectory of decline as the manufacture of footwear - textiles, steel and motor vehicles being prominent examples. Alongside this attrition of the industrial heartlands of UK trade unionism, *Thatcherism at Work* (McInnes, 1978) saw a legislative roll-back of trade union rights combined with an assault on the public sector (where trade unionism had traditionally been strongest). All of these are trends which have either continued or not been reversed under the New Labour governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. As a single index of the increasing vulnerability of the UK workforce, trade union density (i.e. membership as a percentage of the

employed workforce) fell from 57.4% to 28% between 1979 and 2007 (McInnes, 1978, p. 140, Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2008). In the respect that the 30-year old MoFoL case study exemplifies the opportunities for bullying which exist when a weakened labour force is confronted by managements who see the only hope of survival in forcing down unit labour costs, its relevance has, if anything, increased with the passage of time

The method employed in the fieldwork was that of non-participant observation. Not being tied down to a particular task, I was free to visit all departments and talk to the people in them. Since the role of the researcher was not disguised, the establishment of trust took time, but once it had been achieved, most people in the factory seemed quite eager to share their experiences, 'Someone ought to write a book about this place' was not an unusual comment.

Altogether I was in the factory for eight hours a day, five days a week for four months. Each evening, I kept a full research diary. The data obtained were of many kinds: direct observation of working practices, documents, notices and records. I was frequently present at formal meetings, casual conversations, trade union negotiations and what can only be described as rows. When puzzled, as often happened, I asked questions and these often developed into quite extended interviews. The data on the system for monitoring departmental costs, for example, was obtained in this way.

## **The Bullying Individual**

On first impression, and even on continuing impression in the case of its managing director, MoFoL could present the appearance of a peaceful and even a happy workplace. As recounted, Mr John had been keen for the research to take place, expecting that it would bear out his belief that there were lessons to be learnt from MoFoL's 'family atmosphere'. Something of what he meant by this was conveyed by his gift of a cut-glass water-set to one of the older 'girls' on her retirement. Less happy to leave was one in tears at being 'bumped out' after eight years' service by younger, and therefore cheaper, employees. Nevertheless, even she could say of Mr. John, 'He's just dead nice. He said what a shame it was that I had to leave like this.' A female shop steward, on the other hand, was less impressed, 'He says his door is always open, but he comes round with a face like a slapped arse and you don't feel like it.' (Armstrong et al, 1981, p. 73, 79).

Unlike Mr John, the production manager, Mr. Boyle, had no illusions and was correspondingly less enthusiastic about the research. Whilst making no objections, he alone amongst MoFoL's management appeared always too pressed for time to volunteer information. As the research progressed, there emerged a likely reason for this reticence. Not very far beneath the amiable surface of life at MoFoL, there was fear, more exactly the potential for fear, and more exactly still, fear centred on the person of Mr Boyle himself. As with other aspects of organizational culture, the sense of Mr Boyle's ferocity was preserved and perpetuated by a number of anecdotes. This sample was from MoFoL's personnel/training manager, 'He was a right bastard in those days, before the Employment Protection Act came in. He arrived one morning and sacked a bloke just for looking at him. Then he went upstairs where the bloke's wife was working and told her, "you can go too".' (Armstrong et al, 1981 p. 70).

Other anecdotes conveyed a similar impression. In a department which employed exclusively female labour, Mr Boyle was said to have personally torn down the girls' Christmas Decorations on the grounds that they were 'too early'. One needs perhaps

to picture the incident in order to appreciate the intimidatory force of such a display of masculine violence on a group of female workers. Given MoFoL's prevalent pattern of male managers in charge of a female workforce, there was a gendered dimension to much of the bullying which took place. Exemplifying this at the level of petty tyranny (Ashforth, 1994) Mr Boyle was said to have docked a few pence from a girl's wage in order to pay for the offcuts of material from which she had made a birthday card for a friend.

For rather different reasons, male workers too experienced 'difficulties in defending themselves' from Mr Boyle's episodes of physical aggression (the quotation is from the characteristics of bullying itemised on p. 4). According to well established anecdote, he had once burst into one of the lavatories where the men had been enjoying a cigarette, ejected them and smashed up the packing-cases from which they had fashioned improvised seating. Whilst it may have been legitimate to prevent the toilets from being used for a smoking break (though this was not unusual in 1978) the violent manner in which it was accomplished was certainly not. The men concerned, of course, were unable to respond in kind because they would have been instantly dismissed had they done so (Armstrong et al, 1981 p. 103-4).

Whatever the substance behind these anecdotes taken individually, as instances of the folk stories through which the employees of MoFoL conveyed a sense of their working lives, they added up to a potent reminder that unpleasant consequences were likely to attend Mr Boyle's appearance on the shopfloor. The researcher witnessed at first hand the palpable fear which he could inspire when one of the operatives, weary of the persistent material faults which had made it impossible for him to earn a normal wage, declared the job 'a fucking waste of time' and walked out. The foreman who came on the next shift - and was therefore not responsible by any rational standards - took one look at the production figures and let out the desperate wail, 'Oh my God, HE'll go fucking mad.' (Armstrong, 1983, p. 354). Less spectacular, but more interesting theoretically, were the instances of delegated bullying in which supervisors rationalised their harassment of operatives as justified by their own need to avoid attracting Mr Boyle's attentions. 'I'm responsible for production on this job and I'm not getting my arse kicked because you won't do your job.' was one example witnessed during the fieldwork (Armstrong et al, 1981, p. 73). Later, the same supervisor delivered this declaration of intent over the shoulder of the same operative as he struggled to keep up with the moulding machine, 'I'm going to get you off this machine. I could train a baboon to do a better job.' (Armstrong, 1983, p. 353), a particularly clear example of 'personnel work by other means' (Zapf and Warth, 1997, quoted in Salin, 2003, p. 1224). It is in this manner that managerial bullying cascades downwards through an organization as bullied junior managers try to relieve the pressure on themselves by bullying their own subordinates (Rayner et al, 2002, pp. 113-7).

At lower levels of intensity there were the minor humiliations routinely inflicted on MoFoL's workers in their supervisors' attempts to present an appearance of normality on the many occasions on which production had stopped. On these occasions, the men were made to stagger their cigarette breaks 'so that HE won't see all the machines stopped at once' whilst the 'girls' were made to sit by their machines 'Otherwise HE'll be over here'. Here again there was a gender differential in that a greater degree of ostentatious docility was required of the women than the men. In the company's largest department, the female supervisors thought it quite normal to 'get them all sat down' for a managerial visit, as if they were infant schoolchildren, thereby adding the

humiliations of infantilization to those of having to mime productive labour. In their various ways and at various levels all of these anecdotes and incidents served to refresh and reinforce Mr Boyle's fearsome reputation in ways which suggest that Bourdieu's taxonomy of social capital (e.g. 1984) might usefully be extended to include the phobic. As with other forms of capital, though perhaps without the legitimacy, there are social and economic returns to the inculcation of fear, in the shape of compliance, symbolic tokens of submission and propitiatory gift. Fear, it is important to note, is not the same thing as coercion, though it may originate in an act of coercion. Where coercion is effortful, is liable to messy, can provoke resistance and elicits only grudging compliance (Etzioni, 1961, p. 27), fear, once thoroughly established, can persist on the basis of minimal reinforcement and can evoke responses which present every appearance of willing enthusiasm. In extreme cases that display of enthusiasm may even stem from an inward identification of the terrorized with the object of terror (Freud, 1941). None of which alters the fact that what is under discussion is bullying.

Meanwhile, it will be evident that the definition of bullying requires extension if it is to encompass the activities of such as Mr Boyle since there is no suggestion of the prolonged victimisation of particular individuals. Rather, his bullying was a mixture of the demonstrative and the administratively rational. He bullied whomsoever displayed the symptoms of slack and indiscipline, whoever happened to be on the spot when production faltered and whoever 'needed' to be bullied in his drive to reduce unit costs. This being the case, his activities would fall outside conventional definitions of bullying whilst still producing the symptoms of victim behaviour in those on the receiving end. In effect, Mr Boyle had reduced much of MoFoL's workforce to a state of 'bullying-readiness'. In this process, budgetary targets, principally the indicators of the unit costs of production, played their part in furnishing the occasion, the means and the end.

### ***The Role of Budgets***

MoFoL's techniques of budgetary control, though unsophisticated, were well adapted to the task of holding down unit labour costs<sup>2</sup>. Two forms of report were used for this purpose: the records of departmental 'losses' and those of the operative's wages.

### **Labour 'Losses'**

MoFoL's system for recording labour losses is described in more detail in Armstrong (1989). Briefly, the unit labour costs of production assumed in the calculation of MoFoL's factory-gate prices were the aggregate piecework costs per unit. For each department, these assumed labour costs were multiplied by the production figures to give a 'recovered labour cost'. In practice the actual labour cost would always exceed this figure because the piecework payment system agreed at national level between the relevant trade union and employer's federation provided for standby payments whenever production was at a standstill. Even under ideal conditions there would always be such periods, because the production of the full

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<sup>2</sup> The system was less well adapted to the task of co-ordinating production flows. In MoFoL the accumulation of part-completed customer orders had resulted in a number of cancellations. The worksheets, which could have been used to monitor the progress of these orders, were sent instead to an outworker for the purpose of eliminating cheating by the operatives.

ranges of sizes in a customer order required lengthy tool-changes on MoFoL's moulding machines. Thus each department would record a weekly 'labour loss' calculated as the actual wage bill minus recovered labour costs.

Both in their formal job descriptions and in their encounters with senior management these labour losses were treated as an index of the effectiveness of the supervisors concerned. In practice, MoFoL's action on labour losses took the form of sporadic purges spearheaded by Mr Boyle. During these reigns of terror, supervisors had been called in front of the Board of Directors, confronted with their operatives' time-sheets, sometimes from months in the past, and made to account for each period of 'waiting time'. According to the supervisors' reports of these occasions, Mr Boyle's stock response to their faltering efforts at explanation was to bang the table and shout 'They shouldn't *be* waiting. They should be on piecework.' Not surprisingly, supervisors became extremely reluctant to allow any payments for waiting time, no matter how justifiable the workers' case. 'That's it - no more time to be booked. Mr Boyle's orders' was the message brought back by one shell-shocked forelady.

So it was that the pieceworkers in a number of MoFoL's departments (mainly those employing women) found themselves denied the fall-back pay to which they were entitled. Although there were shop stewards in these departments, they were too inexperienced, too uncertain of their rights and too intimidated by their supervisors to pursue the issue. When questioned on the matter, they dismissed it with a fatalistic shrug, such as, 'With the time you lose arguing about it, it's not worth it in the end.' Faced with a more recalcitrant workforce, the practice of the male foremen was more varied. Fully prepared to confront their operatives, the more confident openly deleted the claims for standby payments from their operatives' time-sheets. The less assertive did so surreptitiously, confident that the operatives would be unable to check their claims against the wage packets which were supposed to include them a fortnight later.

Considered as bullying, the managerial practices reported here are of interest beyond the fact that they did not involve the sustained victimization of individuals. They also departed from the model favoured in the literature in that the ends to which they were directed could be considered to be justified. In that respect they would also have evaded the activist definitions of bullying developed in the 1990s. Sections 2 (b) and 2 (c) of the draft Dignity at Work bill which failed in the House of Commons in 1997 list the following as examples of breaches of the right to dignity at work:

*unjustified* criticism on more than one occasion

punishment imposed without *reasonable justification*

Given the threat to MoFoL's survival represented by low-cost imports, the italicised qualifications are important. Who, from the security and relative comfort of a university business school, is to say that Mr Boyle's zeal in impressing the importance of holding down labour costs upon his supervisors was *unjustified*?

## **Wage Records**

Possibly the most elementary of budgetary reports, the raw records of wages paid out have nevertheless proved effective as a means of cost control ever since the inception of the factory system (Clawson, 1980, Hopper and Armstrong, 1991). In MoFoL, Mr Boyle's approach was to pick on a wage packet which appeared out of line with prevailing relativities and use that excess to attack the underlying piece rate.

Particularly vulnerable to this tactic were the women in the stitching-room, MoFoL's largest department. More so than in other departments, these women put themselves under considerable pressure to maintain their earnings on a task which required a great deal of concentration. As the departmental manager put it, 'Some of them can tell you the time by how many they've done. You ask them.' During the research, in fact, one of the women fell from her chair, apparently suffering from a stroke, and was later considered unlikely ever to return.

Under this kind of pressure, it made little sense to some of the women that they should struggle to get in front of the clock only to squander their advantage on tea and lunch breaks. In fact only a few took tea breaks and a substantial minority (the 'grabbers') worked through their lunch breaks too. Formally speaking, notices signed by Mr Boyle and the Company Secretary had made it clear that both practices contravened the Health and Safety of Work Act. In practice and informally, they were condoned. As the Senior Shop Steward pointed out, 'What they ought to do is turn the machines off at lunch times like they do in the Wilson factory. That's all they've got to do.'

In this setting, the following episode, recounted by the Senior Steward, was typical of a number of similar incidents:

There was a young girl on that motif welding machine. Just a young girl she was, about to get married and she wanted to save up. Well, she worked right through her tea breaks, dinner breaks and everything. It was fantastic, and in one week she earned £120. Well, you won't believe it. They held a Board meeting about it. They were all there and they called her in. 'Jenny', they said, 'we can't have a girl of 18 earning that much'. And they cut her rate. I ask you, What incentive is there?

(Armstrong et al, 1981, p. 108)

How far this can be construed as bullying and what part was played by the Senior Steward himself, are questions which will be deferred for the moment. The problem posed by such tactics for trade unionists is that it is difficult to muster support for the defence of individuals or small groups whose earnings have risen out of line with those of their potential supporters. It so happened that the group of workers which included the Senior Steward himself (the 'clickers') found this out the hard way.

The national wage agreement to which MoFoL was signatory through the employers' federation provided for cost-of-living adjustments to the piece rates at six monthly intervals. Having made it known for some time that he considered that these adjustments were eroding the firm's ability to compete, Mr Boyle decided to 'compensate' for the clickers' cost-of-living rise by cutting their piece-rates during a long production run which had kept their earnings unusually high. When the normal shorter runs returned, the consequences of the clickers' 'agreement' to this move became only too apparent. The Senior Steward takes up the story:

The trouble was that they'd all started scrambling to make up their money. I can understand them. I've got mortgage payments to keep up too, but when I went into his office, he spread the cards out and said, 'Show me a man who's lost out.' I said to him, 'But They're working harder to make that money now.' He just smiled and said, 'That's what I want.'

(Armstrong et al, 1981 p. 134-5)



Ever the opportunists, Mr Boyle and other MoFoL managers also enlisted a television documentary about the competition from South Korea faced by the UK shoe industry in the cause of driving down labour costs. For a few weeks ‘the Koreans’ entered the routine vocabulary of industrial relations at MoFoL, as in, ‘You’ll have to take a lower piece-rate on this job if we’re going to compete with the Koreans.’ By these means, Mr Boyle successfully induced a group of female pieceworkers to accept lower rates for work on a new line of trainers, ‘so that we can quote a really competitive price’ (Armstrong, 1989), but the research ended before it became clear whether or not this actually enabled MoFoL to obtain the order.

How much of this should count as bullying is debatable. It is common to most definitions that there should be an imbalance of power between the bully and the bullied, so that the targets have difficulty in defending themselves (Rayner et al, 2002, p. 11). It is easy to believe this of an eighteen-year-old woman summoned to appear in front of the Board of Directors, though one does wonder what the Senior Steward himself was doing at the time. It is less easy to believe it of the clickers, the nearest approach in MoFoL to a well-organized group of workers engaged on a strategically important task. Though it is true that the power advantage lay with Mr Boyle, particularly in the long run, it might be more accurate to say that the men allowed themselves to be outmanoeuvred.

The case of the women lined up for work on the new trainer is more complex. The threat behind Mr Boyle’s demand for lower piece-rates was that of redundancy and there were plenty of examples in MoFoL, some of which occurred during the research, to show that the possibility was only too real. Typical of the production regimes which Burawoy (1983) later dubbed ‘hegemonic despotism’, MoFoL’s weakness in the market place could thus be turned to the advantage of management in its dealings with the workforce. ‘Consent’ to wage cuts in order to avoid the alternative of unemployment, however, would seem to stretch the term ‘hegemony’ to its breaking-point. Whether or not Mr Boyle’s exercise of raw economic power could be termed bullying, depends partly on how ‘reasonable’ one believes his demands to have been, given the Korean competition on the one hand and the company’s 40% mark-up on prime costs on the other.

## ***Envoi***

MoFoL no longer exists. Even the former textile mill in which it was housed was bulldozed flat some years ago and in its place there stands a new block of flats. What lends this thirty-year-old case material its contemporary relevance and perhaps a certain poignancy is that its management and workforce were early to experience the pressures of globalized product markets which have so markedly increased since that time. Whatever Mr Boyle’s personal predilections might have contributed to the harshness of life in MoFoL, his determination to reduce unit labour costs in the face of low-cost imports made perfect sense, even though it ultimately proved insufficient.

## ***Conclusions***

This paper has argued that budgetary controls can provide the occasion, a medium and a rationale for managerial bullying. Apart from its possible co-optation for the conduct of personal vendettas, budget-based bullying evades most of the definitions of bullying current in the literature in that it is not persistently targeted at particular individuals but distributed according to some operational or commercial logic.

Despite this difference, its effects appear to be similar. In a company studied almost three decades ago by the author, the production manager had established himself as an object of fear for the majority of the workforce, so that his interventions on those occasions when budgetary reports indicated abnormal unit costs were effective both in reducing those costs and in re-affirming his fearsome reputation.

Given that the company was operating in a market for mass-produced consumer goods which was undergoing intense competition from low-cost imports, this was a style of management which made perfect commercial sense, whatever its human costs. Since many UK companies have experienced the same conditions in the decades following the fieldwork, it is to be expected that their workforces will also have experienced similar forms of budget-based bullying.

The significance of the research from the practical point of view is that these forms of bullying are likely to evade the definitions prevalent amongst anti-bullying campaigners. In order to be effective, these practitioners need to enlist the co-operation of those who have the power to intervene on a case-by-case basis, normally senior managements or human resource departments. In consequence they tend to define bullying in a manner which suggests that it can be rectified without detriment to a company's operations and without disturbing its overall systems of administration. Practitioner definitions therefore tend to see bullying as a context-independent interpersonal act, as one in which particular individuals are singled out for adverse treatment and one in which the mistreatment persists over a considerable period.

Since budgetary bullying of the kind described in this paper fits none of the foregoing categories, the implication for this author, is that it can be dealt with only by collective action by the employees concerned rather than intervention by single-issue campaigners, however well-intentioned.

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