



Exploring a framework to manage bullying in South African academia: Human resources perspective



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Orientation: Bullying is widespread at South African universities and has short- and long-term negative consequences for employees and organisations.

Research purpose: The study explored human resources (HR) practitioners' challenges in managing bullying at work and sought to establish a framework for managing bullying above and below the surface in the organisation from their viewpoint.

Motivation for the study: Human resources practitioners are a strategic link between diverse constituencies in the organisation and consequently encounter several challenges in their attempts to address and manage bullying.

Research approach/design and method: A qualitative constructivist grounded theory research was exploited to examine nine HR practitioners' standpoints in two universities in the Gauteng province.

Main findings: Human resources practitioners' roles remain dichotomised between serving dissimilar stakeholders with diametric expectations while protecting employees from prospective bullying circumstances. The proposed framework to manage workplace bullying above and below the surface from the HR practitioners' context has both pragmatic and theoretical noteworthiness.

Practical/managerial implications: The combinations of the power dynamics, roles and factors at play have acute ramifications on the HR practitioner's dexterity to circumvent, administrate and investigate bullying incidents. A proposed framework can help organisation management, practitioners and employees to be unconditionally alert about bullying multiplicities, expedite holistic determinations and preventative interventions to embrace diversity and panoramically comprehend bullying occurrences.

Contribution/value-add: This study adds a noticeable contribution to the field of workplace bullying, HR management and attendant remedial measures from HR practitioners in South Africa's academic institution context.

Keywords: above and below the surface; human resource practitioners; workplace bullying; bullying management; paradoxical duality.

Introduction

Orientation

Workplace bullying 'is rife at South African universities vertically and horizontally' (Mangolothi, 2020, p. 17). The evil of workplace bullying has grown immensely in the past 27 years (Goosen 2019), and at least one-third of employees are affected directly or indirectly (Hodgins et al., 2020). Health, dignity and wellbeing are inextricably linked to work and the time that employees devote to work provides a conducive environment for their susceptibility to bullying (Giorgi et al., 2015). Scholars affirmed that work has negative and positive effects on employees' health, dignity and wellbeing (Conco et al., 2021; Mokgolo, 2017). Organisations worldwide are grappling with workplace bullying and its dire short-term and long-term consequences on employees' dignity, health and wellbeing (Conco et al., 2021; Motsei & Nkomo, 2016; Nzonzo, 2017), commitment, organisational citizenship behaviours and effectiveness (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018), reputation (Smit, 2021) and staff turnover and recruitment efforts (Mangolothi, 2020). Despite these catastrophic consequences, Hodgins et al. (2020) and Mnangolothi (2020) posit that some organisations globally have workplace bullying policies in place. Yet, most organisations still struggle to develop robust preventative and supportive interventions to combat bullying situations.

In South Africa, workplace bullying has become a major research topic. However, these research studies provide limited insights into the human resources (HR) professionals' voice and role in managing workplace bullying and interventions that may better HR practitioners' deftness, wellbeing and dignity. Mokgolo (2017) defines workplace bullying in the South African context as:

[A]ny intentional or unintentional repeated and persistent hostile and malicious action(s) directed by more powerful employees at work at those less powerful, typically through a combination of repeated and regular (e.g., daily, weekly, or over six months or more) inappropriate and unwelcome overt or covert, verbal and non-verbal behaviours that a reasonable person would find distressing, threatening, intimidating, manipulating, humiliating, abusing, sabotaging, degrading or offensive, harassing, stigmatising and victimising, or some combination of these, manifesting over a period of time. (p. 60)

Using this definition, HR practitioners can identify bullying in the workplace and investigate it. Human resources practitioners serve as an arch yoke linking distinguishable parties in the organisation. They face numerous hurdles in their attempts to deal with and manage bullying while also attempting to promote employees' dignity, wellbeing and sound relations. Workplace bullying is a chronic problem that needs to be addressed in organisations, including its potentially devastating effects on the role of HR practitioners. The prevalence of workplace bullying not only entails focusing on disciplining perpetrators but also emphasising the importance of effective interventions and strategies to safeguard vulnerable employees such as mediation, dispute resolution and conflict management (Hodgins et al., 2020; Rockett et al., 2017). It is important to establish anti-bullying policies as an early intervention to prevent bullying acts and ensure a conducive working environment that supports HR practitioners in managing bullying effectively.

Research purposes and objectives

This study suggests a framework to manage workplace bullying above and below the surface in universities. The framework will assist organisations to attain a greater understanding of how the prevention and management of workplace bullying situations affect HR practitioners' roles and lives.

Research design

Research approach

This study used the qualitative constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) to examine the participants' sensitive behavioural phenomena (Fahie, 2014), such as workplace bullying. A critical realism interpretive perspective (Terre Blanche & Kelly, 2004) was used to gain insight into the participants' experience and understanding of bullying in the workplace.

Research strategy

The study used a constructivist grounded theory strategy, which enabled the researchers to concurrently gather, analyse and build themes based on data and in the co-generation of meaning between researchers and participants (Charmaz, 2014). This strategy also helps to 'organise, understand and interpret situations, experiences, meanings and actions' in the real-life participants setting (Charmaz, 2014 cited in Mokgolo, 2017, p. 151).

Research setting

The study examined practitioners from HR service departments of two universities in the Gauteng province. The HR service functions include recruitment, HR planning, HR development, health, safety and wellness, performance management, compensation and benefits as well as the management of employee relations and compliance.

Entrée and establishing researcher roles

In accordance with the permission granted by the management and institutional research committees, HR practitioners were recruited through telephone and email. The researchers' access to these practitioners' contact details was granted by both the HR executive directors of the institutions. Informed consent was obtained from practitioners before the commencement of interviews, and participation was voluntary.

Research participants

Fulltime HR officials with at least 3 and above years of experience were selected using purposeful sampling to gain better knowledge about the subject under study. This is called 'exclusion or inclusion' criteria sampling (Omona, 2013). The criteria helped researchers to identify illegibility characteristics to select suitable subjects to be included in the study, for example, position, status and tenure, the subject's work roles, gender, age and race. The characteristics of the group included five black participants, two white people and two Indians, of which five were female and four male.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews provided a more in-depth understanding of nine HR practitioners' bullying experiences in the natural setting. Studies using grounded theory typically have a small sample size (Charmaz, 2014). Advocates of qualitative studies accented that researchers must have a smaller satisfactory sample size of homogenous participants who possess common experience, knowledge or expertise in relation to the study in question to appropriately analyse the data content on time (Bonde, 2013; Charmaz, 2014; Mason, 2010). A theoretical sampling process guides the sampling process, which is flexible and iterative (Birks & Mills, 2015). Interviews took about an hour, and the saturation of data collection was based on the richness of data rather than its quantity, which was determined by constant

comparison of the new material with the research objective (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality because of the touchy subject under inquiry.

Data recording

Interviews were audio-recorded after participants consented and a professional transcriber transcribed the recordings verbatim.

Strategies employed to ensure data quality and integrity

The researchers repeatedly listened to the recordings to authenticate the accuracy and correctness of transcription. The attestation of data obtained in the first interviews was concluded with the participants through a virtual engagement via Microsoft Teams having culminated in the acquisition of additional experiences, which lasted approximately 20 min on average.

Data analysis

Using grounded theory analysis, data analysis began immediately following the first two interviews and continued with subsequent interviews (Charmaz, 2006). Based on constant comparison, codes were analysed through memoing, assigning meaning to data iteratively during successive coding stages (Birks & Mills, 2015). The grounded theory stages of open, axial (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2006) were used. Open coding involves deconstructing data, comparing and labelling important data as 'codes', while axial coding helps to identify relationships, similarities and contradictions within the codes. During the last stage of the theoretical coding stage, four main themes and sub-themes were formulated by conceptually incorporating, comparing and contrasting categories with the existing literature (Charmaz, 2014). ATLAS.ti data analysis software was used to analyse the qualitative data emanating from the various stages of this coding process.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval to conduct the study was granted by both the research organisations' Management and Research Ethics Committees (Reference: REC2013/01/001). The specific names of the institutions are omitted to safeguard the participants' anonymity and to ensure covertness regarding the choleric problem under consideration.

Literature review, results and discussion

This section presents the framework concerning workplace bullying and studies and critically demonstrates how the thematic results support or contradict the literature. It further presents the results (a version of reality on the phenomenon under study) in the form of a proposed integrative framework in a delineative schema, depicting a perspective of HR practitioners on workplace bullying. Table 1 presents a precis of the focal themes and their sub-themes, which emerged from the results and elucidates how the data analysis process evolved.

An integrative framework for managing workplace bullying

Figure 1 illustrates the association between focal themes and the interplay of their related sub-themes to expound the multifaceted inundation faced by HR practitioners in curbing bullying within an organisational context.

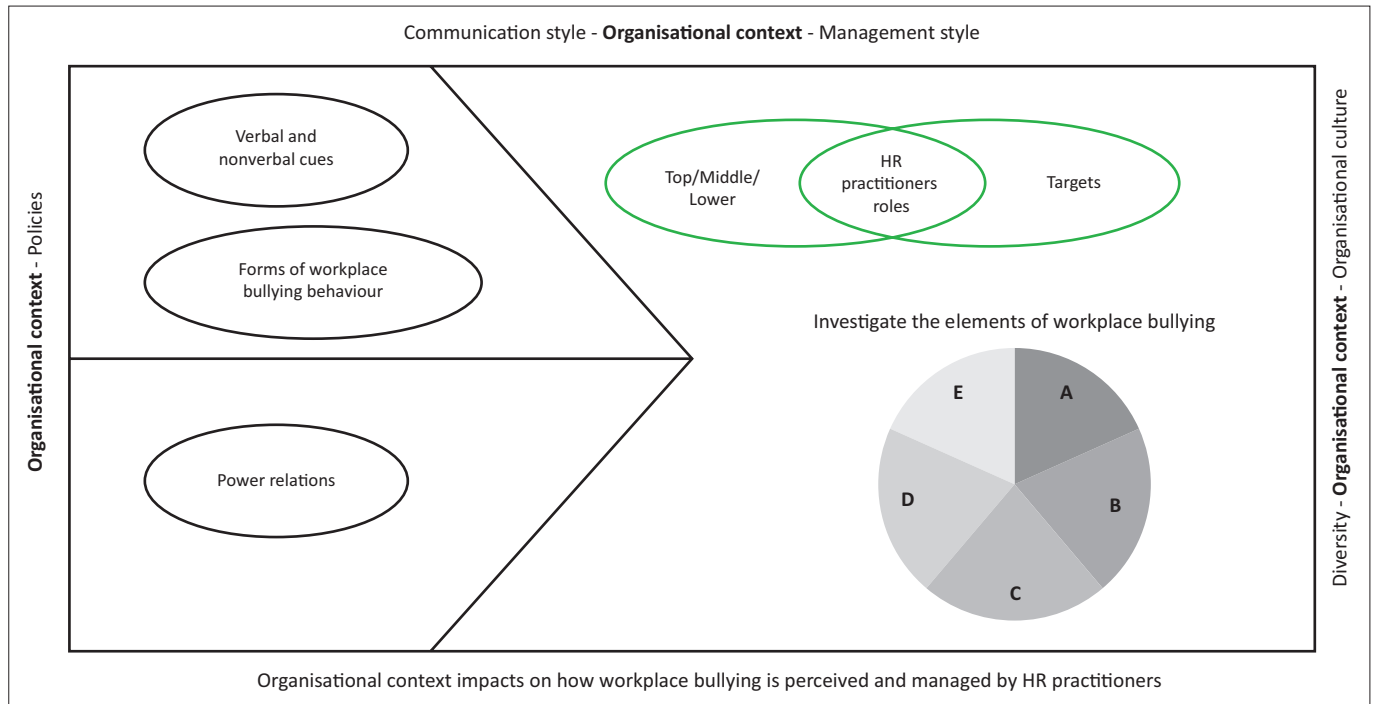
Figure 1 exhibits the manifestation of workplace bullying in Theme 1, which is also a bipartite of sub-themes: verbal and nonverbal bullying cues, and forms of workplace bullying behaviour, emphasised by HR practitioners as signs of bullying. Theme 2 emphasises power relations, which was revealed as a fundamental component in all bullying occurrences and defines bullying as a relational phenomenon based on power imbalances in interactions among victims and perpetrators. Power imbalances in interpersonal relationships are underpinned by hierarchy level, associations with prominent people, mobbing, tenure and expertise. Theme 3 focuses on some elements of workplace bullying that HR practitioners may use to confirm and assess the likelihood of workplace bullying: (1) the bully's intent, (2) the target's perspective, (3) the consequences on the individual, group and organisation, (4) third-party evidence and (5) the level of occurrence evidence. Lastly, Theme 4 accentuates organisational context factors (i.e. organisational culture, management style, diversity, communication and the lack of a bullying policy) that influence how bullying is perpetuated in the organisation, posing a challenge to HR practitioners' abilities to deal with bullying at work.

As noted in Figure 1, workplace bullying cues, behaviours, power relations dynamics and factors, and continuous relationships between the HR practitioners, line managers and their juniors are underlying fundamentals that contribute to HR practitioners' predicament in preventing and managing

TABLE 1: Focal grounded theory themes and their sub-themes.

| Theme 1: The manifestation of workplace bullying | Theme 2: Power relations | Theme 3: The elements of workplace bullying | Theme 4: Organisational context |
|---|---|---|---|
| Sub-themes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Verbal and non-verbal cues Different forms of bullying behaviour | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Job hierarchy/level Relationships with influential or powerful people Tenure Mobbing or ganging-up Experience and expertise | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intent of the bully Target's perception Effects on individual, group and organisation Third party evidence Level of occurrence evidence | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Issues and dilemmas in handling workplace bullying HR practitioners' role dynamics in the organisation |

Source: Adopted from Mokgolo, M. (2017). *Workplace bullying: A human resource practitioner perspective*. Unpublished Doctoral thesis. University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa. Retrieved from <https://uir.unisa.ac.za/handle/10500/23848>, p. 132



Source: Adopted from Mokgolo, M. (2017). *Workplace bullying: A human resource practitioner perspective*. Unpublished Doctoral thesis. University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa. Retrieved from <https://uir.unisa.ac.za/handle/10500/23848>, p. 136

HR, human resources.

FIGURE 1: A centripetal anatomy of themes and their sub-themes developed from human resources practitioners' perspective.

bullying in organisations. This predicament is exemplified by the paradoxical nature of HR practitioners' role, cleft amid management and the targets, and perpetuated by ambidextrous organisational factors that repeatedly handicap their efforts in bullying management.

An integrative discussion of workplace bullying

The integrative framework alone does not set forth a plenteous picture to guide organisations in resolving the HR practitioners' bewilderment in managing bullying at work (Adom et al., 2018). Mensah et al. (2020) maintain that the proposed framework should comprehensively outline the topic under investigation, in this case, workplace bullying, and demonstrate its origins in the scientific data analysed. In congruence, the various themes, sub-themes and proposed framework are explained in this section in more detail.

Theme 1: The manifestation of workplace bullying

Workplace bullying is multifarious and can manifest in several forms (Cowan, 2012; Einarsen et al., 2018; Mokgolo & Barnard, 2019; Smit, 2021). The manifestation of workplace bullying often assumes verbal and nonverbal cues and specific forms of behaviour, or any combination, from HR practitioners' orientation. Body language, language usage, facial expressions and/or voice tone, among others, can all be recognised as verbal and nonverbal cues that reflect humiliating and unpleasant communication. Unjust treatment, denying information, rumour or gossip, demoralising and humiliation, mocking, ostracism of staff, petty behaviour and intimidation can manifest as forms of bullying.

From the literature, destructive verbal and nonverbal behaviour are the main causes of workplace bullying and are utilised at work to create unpleasant relations and toxic conditions (Bartlett & Bartlett, 2011; Conco et al., 2021; Motsei & Nkomo, 2016; Lutgen-Sandvik & Arsht, 2014; Mokgolo & Barnard, 2019; Pietersen, 2007; Rockett et al., 2017; Salin et al., 2018). Consequently, this affects employees' physical and psychological health and threatens their self-esteem (Dzurec et al., 2017; Sheehan et al., 2018). Human resources practitioners' viewpoints are comparable to how literature describes and explains workplace bullying. Because of the subjective nature of perception, the distinctiveness of verbal and nonverbal acts provides signals to HR practitioners that bullying is eventuating. However, the cues and elements of evidence must be corroborated because they raise questions about subjectivity and perspectival judgement, making it more difficult for HR practitioners to establish, prevent and manage this imperious terror in their organisations.

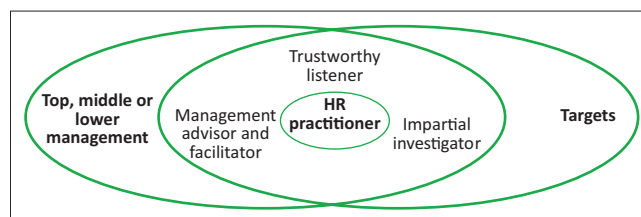
Theme 2: Power relations and dynamics

Previous scholars have extensively explored the constructs of power and ascribed multiple meanings to it, which depict it as being overt (observable) manifestation, meaning employees are protected from destructive behaviour, for example, bullying, and covert (hidden or unnoticeable) manifestation, meaning to protect the organisation, rather than the employees (see Gaventa, 1980; Kearins, 1996). These scholars' views confirm Mintzberg's (1983, p. xiv) narrative that power is a 'sly and elusive phenomenon' and Dzurec et al.'s (2017) assertion that individual or group characters change over time, the same as power, in that they are both

not constant. In this regard, power in organisations is multifaceted and is viewed as salient by people. Therefore, power is subject to abuse by various people in the organisation (Patterson et al., 2018), predominantly by perpetrators over targets via organisational practices (Hodgins et al., 2020). Power is widely defined as the ability to influence others and enforce compliance to accomplish organisational goals. How power is exercised in an organisation remains a critical concern: the powerless are forced or persuaded to do things they otherwise would not do. Power is necessary in the workplace because 'appropriate protection strategies such as anti-bullying policies need to be in place to prevent the abuse of power' (Hodgins et al., 2020, p. 283). In this regard, power as a complex phenomenon is critically important to explore when examining relations in organisations.

Power relations dynamics were identified by the participants in this study as a key source propounding workplace bullying. This was supported by other studies (e.g. Heizmann & Fox, 2017; Sheehan et al., 2018). These studies support the HR practitioners' viewpoint that power dynamics can generate a hostile organisational climate and culture that permits bullying acts to occur and bullies to get away with their bullying acts, further rendering HR practitioners incapable of preventing bullying. Power dynamics are essentially concretised as a power imbalance in relationships that manifest one party's benefits over the other, such as hierarchy, tenure, mobbing, experience and expertise, and connection with dominant, distinguished people. It can be suggested that power imbalance is observable in work hierarchy, tenure, experience and competence but less probable in the occurrences that underpin mobbing and interactions with connection to dominant, distinguished people. This finding highlights that knowing overt and covert power incompatibility is critical to comprehending HR practitioners' bullying experiences in workplaces. Thus, power disparities and organisational context factors influence the occurrence of bullying, according to Dzurec et al. (2017) and Thrasher et al. (2020), and indicate dyadic interactions between employees in specific roles and perpetuate chronic bullying interactions within an organisation. So, when some power relations interplay, it makes it difficult for HR practitioners to distinguish between instances of relational bullying.

Some scholars argue that bullying is an undifferentiated phenomenon in nature in that it is more likely to be elicited in interactions at work that epitomise power imbalances (Cunniff & Mostert, 2012; Dzurec et al., 2017; Hutchinson, 2016). It became evident that power relations, as a sub-theme of this study, are important in HR practitioners' relationships with management, employees and other stakeholders, for example, union representatives. These sources of power relations make it problematic for them to deal with the perpetrator, intensifying role-playing conflicts. Their incompatible roles such as advisor and listener (see Figure 2) are the outcome of power disparity and confirmation of misuse of power under the surface in the organisational context, which pose exorbitant problems to practitioners in



Source: Adapted from Mokgolo, M. (2017). *Workplace bullying: A human resource practitioner perspective*. Unpublished Doctoral thesis. University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa. Retrieved from <https://uir.unisa.ac.za/handle/10500/23848>, p. 134
HR, human resources.

FIGURE 2: The human resources practitioners' roles dynamics serving various stakeholders.

dealing with bullying. As a result, bullying flourishes and creates work environments antagonistic to productivity (Heizman & Fox, 2017; Sheehan et al., 2018). These findings support other scholars' findings that power difference in most cases has a direct or indirect impact on workplace bullying and mediation by the HR unit, which exacerbates bullying in the workplace (Mokgolo & Barnard, 2019; Smit, 2021). It may also result in an increase in verbal and nonverbal forms of bullying behaviour (Dzurec et al., 2017; Namie & Namie, 2015; Rockett et al., 2017). Addressing power imbalance dynamics in the workplace, regardless of forms, could assist supervisors or managers and HR practitioners in particular in preventing bullying occurrences.

Theme 3: The elements of bullying in the organisation

Human resources practitioners identified the elements of bullying in organisations as the main criteria for confirming and distinguishing the manifestation of probable workplace bullying. These elements comprise the bully's intent *A*, the target's perspective *B*, the consequences on the people and institution *C*, third-party confirmation *D* and the occurrence of corroboration *E*, as presented in letters in Figure 1. Given the subjective and perspectival nature of people's experiences, HR practitioners can use the elements of bullying as criteria or a methodology to objectively and confidently determine the nature, severity, scope and resolution of suspected bullying to assess, confirm and resolve bullying situations.

Researchers hold diverse views on what constitutes bullying, whether it is a result of the aggressor's intent or the victim's subjective perspective (e.g. Cowan, 2012; Cowan & Bochantin, 2018; Einarsen et al., 2018; Harvey et al., 2009; Lutgen-Sandvik & Arsht, 2014; Pietersen, 2007; Sheehan et al., 2018). The HR practitioners specified the bully's intention and the target's viewpoint as key factors in bullying circumstances. In light of these two standpoints, it remains clear that HR practitioners acknowledge bullying behaviour from two perspectives. This view could be attributed to the fact that the bully's intent is now and then 'difficult to ascertain, manifesting in covert power dynamics or behaviour below the surface of consciousness' (Cilliers, 2012 cited in Mokgolo, 2017, p.148); also, the target's standpoint remains crucial. The target perceives the behaviour as bullying, and as a result, the HR practitioner must deal with the target's reality at a tangible level, known as above the surface. Bullying at work is described as a counterproductive interpersonal behaviour

(Pietersen, 2007) and 'as a damaging unconscious dynamic that operates below the surface of its conscious behavioural manifestation, hurting individuals and organisations in ways that they are often unaware of' (Cilliers, 2012 cited in Mokgolo, 2017, p. 148). Its manifestation is more ascribed to a toxic workplace. As a result, it becomes problematic for HR practitioners to distinguish the certainty and amplitude of bullying acts and address them adequately (Mokgolo, 2017). This finding supports findings by Einarsen et al. (2018) and Hodgins et al. (2020) that bullying in the workplace as a development cycle can be disputable or indisputable, calamitous or ameliorative for the bullied victim, which can exacerbate stigmatisation.

The elements of workplace bullying dynamics impact how HR practitioners identify, ascertain and prevent bullying in the organisation. Human resources practitioners have proclaimed that in establishing bullying circumstances, they probe the circumstance of derogatory verbal and nonverbal cues as this is paramount to interfaces with power disparity and its consequential factors that they cogitate as catastrophic. Some studies maintain that the extent of bullying manifestation in workplaces unmasks reiterative pertinacious episodes of bullying and its consequent experiences (Dzurec et al., 2017; Mokgolo & Barnard, 2019; Smit, 2021). Therefore, when dealing with workplace bullying, the bully's motive and the target's reality should be considered (Cowan & Bochantin, 2018). The positions of HR practitioners are expanded into the elements of bullying, regardless of insignificant or significant signs and forms of demeanour unfolding.

Theme 4: Organisational context

Workplace bullying is predominantly restricted to a single person or binary occurrences in an interrelationship between the target and perpetrator (Einarsen et al., 2018; Hutchinson, 2016; Thrasher et al., 2020). However, this perspective overlooks the organisational context and integral factors contributing to the dilemmas. Instead, the repercussion of the organisational context is critical in understanding the association between organisational context factors and role dynamics that strengthen bullying. For exegetical purposes, two sub-themes, HR practitioners' role and dilemma in the workplace and organisational context factors were constructed to exhibit the extreme predicament that HR practitioners are exposed to in handling bullying in the organisation.

Sub-theme 4.1: Human resources practitioners' role and dilemma in organisations: Figure 2 characterises the dissimilar HR practitioners' roles attending various people in bullying scenes. The figure is adapted from Mokgolo (2017, p. 134) to describe the synchronicity of HR practitioners' roles: 'being the target trustworthy listeners, impartial investigators, and management advisors and facilitators in the bullying cycle'.

Figure 2 presents how HR practitioners understand and deal with the emotional burden of responding to various stakeholders with often contradictory intentions. They were

also expected to work collaboratively with different line managers to ensure that HR policies and procedures were meritoriously enforced. This view that line management should be responsible for bullying prevention and management has two implications: it may help to deter bullying from the beginning and stimulate good working relations among employees regardless of level, rank or status.

Two HR practitioners exceptionally summed up the general views as follows:

'The targets envisage HR practitioners to be empathetic and soberly champion their problems or concerns.' (P8, male, 20 years)

at the same time:

'They are expected by the top management to prioritise organisation's goals and enforce management decisions unequivocally.' (P9, female, 5 years)

This implies that HR practitioners' roles are split between target and management, and they have to make sense of opposite parties' worlds and give meaning and interpretations to real-life experiences of uncertain or confusing situations. Cowan and Bochantin (2018) argue that such roles inhibit the HR practitioners' dexterity to intervene, determine, ascertain and effectively curb workplace bullying. These views resonate with a 'constructivist-interpretive approach in that it helps to organise, understand and interpret situations, experiences, meanings and actions' (Charmaz, 2014 cited in Mokgolo, 2017, p. 151). The HR practitioners' endeavours to resolve bullying situations are often complicated by the bully's power or the power of those related to the bully within the organisation (as stated in Theme 2). Because bullies or their friends are treated differently when reported, they often go unpunished, or if investigated, their disciplinary hearing is deliberately delayed to frustrate the target. Consequently, this dilemma results in HR practitioners being perceived by the target as inept to address both the target's and management's expectations. This could be attributed to HR practitioners not being authorised to make certain decisions regarding bullying events. The findings of this study are congruent with those of Cowan and Bochantin (2018) and Djurkovic et al. (2021) where victims anticipate the HR practitioners to resolve their complaints, including bullying occurrences effectively. Misrepresenting bullying problems can multiply deleterious effects on interpersonal relations, employees' happiness and organisations' bottom line (Einarsen et al., 2018).

These findings disclose why targets in most cases appraise HR practitioners negatively in managing bullying cases. The researchers agree with some scholars that 'overt or covert bullying by senior people or senior management apt to be more hurtful than bullying by colleagues' (Cunniff & Mostert, 2012, p. 14). In this regard, the environment inhibits HR practitioners from dealing effectively and decisively with the bullying situation because of their own lower power base in the hierarchy.

The lower power position of the HR practitioner is paradoxical. With this in mind, Gill (2017) contends that management would often put HR practitioners under pressure to implement and maintain their utilitarian agenda towards achieving the strategic objectives of the organisation. The utilitarian agenda could negatively expose the HR practitioner to being viewed as unjust when dealing with complaints or becoming a victim of bullying because of inadequate managerial support.

According to Mokgolo and Barnard (2019), these findings highlight the:

[P]aradoxical duality of the HR practitioners' role, interwoven with a complex triad of power relations and a context that lacks proper anti-bullying policy and perceived line managerial support to address bullying. (p. 11)

These findings also confirm those of Thrasher et al. (2020), Patterson et al. (2018) and Smit (2021) that workplace bullying is puzzling owing to the unique attributes of targets, bullies, witnesses and organisational context, all of which dynamically contribute to bullying prevalence and intensification. Notwithstanding role dilemmas, HR practitioners are still regarded as champions and strategic partners in an organisational context (Cowan & Bochantin, 2018; Djurkovic et al., 2021).

Sub-theme 4.2: Organisational context factors: Organisational context factors such as 'the management style, organisational culture, diversity, communication and absence of policy' (Mokgolo, 2017 p.143), as illustrated in Figure 1, underline dynamics that could potentially pervade or prevent the manifestation of bullying and empower or prohibit the HR practitioners to manoeuvre bullying issues. Cilliers (2012, p. 4) establishes that these context factors consonantly include 'conscious or unconscious forces and psychological setups' that influence how an organisation is perceived and behaves as a whole. All HR practitioners construed these factors as having a primary influence on how workplace bullying is surmised, curbed, skyrocketed or curtailed the potentiality of a bully or bullies easily left without punishment. In addition, it puts more strain and added complexity on HR practitioners in addressing bullying situations in the organisation. Most researchers supported HR practitioners' views and stated that if these organisational context factors are not managed appropriately, they will have a substantial impact on the perpetuation of workplace bullying and result in severe physical, mental and emotional wellbeing consequences (Conco et al., 2021; Cunniff & Mostert, 2012; Motsei & Nkomo, 2016; Salin et al., 2018), reduced organisational productivity, increase absenteeism and turnover intention (Hodgins et al., 2020; Smit, 2021), and catalyse job stress and dissatisfaction (Dzurec et al., 2017).

The management style and organisational culture: Human resources practitioners identified management style and organisational culture as the main sources of permeating bullying practices in organisations. Some researchers

maintain that leadership and management styles contribute to bullying organisations (Einarsen et al., 2018; Hodgins et al., 2020; Motsei & Nkomo, 2016; Smit, 2021). Management style and organisational culture were articulated by the HR practitioners as significant factors influencing their viewpoints and recognition of the phenomenon in question and contributed to the incongruities of their role (as discussed in the section 'Sub-theme 4.1') and contradictions in probing bullying occurrences. Additionally, bullying might surface by HR practitioners administering management directives while striving to avoid being accused of siding with management. These results support the findings of Mokgolo (2017, p.152) who noted why it was problematic and exhausting for 'the HR practitioners to address workplace bullying; and the targets to report a bullying complaint to their line managers rather than turning to the HR practitioners for help'. Hodgins et al. (2020) and Rockett et al. (2017) contend that line managers or supervisors who do not acknowledge any deleterious demeanour or disposition make it better for an HR practitioner to circumscribe the bully. Meanwhile, Smit (2021) argues that line managers who lack the aptitude to recognise and deal with workplace bullying make it burdensome for an HR practitioner to encircle the aggressor while deterring the victim from reporting bullying. It appears that management style and organisational culture permit the probability of bullying in an organisation, particularly one that does not have an anti-bullying culture.

Bullying preserved through communication style: Communication is, according to the participants, an essential method of interaction by humans in any organisation and is associated with interpersonal wellbeing and power alterity dynamics, which repeatedly diffuse unwelcomed communication in the organisation. Communication is congruous to management style and organisational culture, which exemplify the toxic complexity of bullying through interaction (Lutgen-Sandvik & Arshet, 2014), which erodes the organisational climate and damages employees' health and wellbeing. This article encourages the development of an anti-workplace bullying policy, which should include the fact that HR practitioners, bullies and aggrieved employees require primary psychological support (Andriani, 2018). For HR practitioners, cussed communication is a concern that mostly contributes to interpersonal bullying. One HR practitioner notably aggregated others' riposte as follows: 'They believed that workplace bullying manifested as a result of annoying and humiliating way employees interact to everyone at work' (P3). This finding is consistent with Andriani's (2018) study, which found that bullying in an organisation can be constructed as relational among employees across hierarchal levels or statuses. This suggests that a pernicious manner of communication eventually results in the targets being negatively affected. This becomes worsened by their inability to vent about being bullied in the workplace because it encompasses emotions and feelings. Namie (2017, p. 47) argues that 'bullies often use ambiguous communication methods and epitomises half-truth about the intended target'. The findings of this study elucidate HR

practitioners' workplace bullying experiences and its repercussions on their roles, careers, integrity, relations and health.

Bullying perpetuated through diversity: The concept of diversity entails an embracement and recognition of the latitudinous spectrum of employees' backgrounds, inter alia, 'gender, age, sexual orientation, race, colour, ethnicity, physical abilities, status, personality, experience, income, affiliation and other philosophies' (Inegbedion et al., 2020, p. 2). With regard to ethnicity, to date, there is a paucity of literature that links ethnicity to workplace bullying. Human resources practitioners particularise bullying as an emotional response galvanised by diversity in the workplace. Cunniff and Mostert (2012) found that in South Africa, organisational diversity dynamics commonly prolong bullying. In essence, employees of diverse races, ideologies, genders, ages, among others, positively and inversely experience levels of bullying depending on their perceptions of status, rank or level. This article demonstrates that diversity dimensionalities constitute the bullying journal and unsought verbal and nonverbal signs, including dispositions, are consummated more delicately among heterogeneous employees and construed as bullying at work. This finding is congruous with Bergbom and Vartia's (2021) findings that diversity dynamics such as race, ideology and ethnicity are becoming problematic in the organisation universally because of globalisation and increased migration, with more employees likely to experience bullying because of performance, competition for resource and promotion prospects. Human resources practitioners ascribed bullying propensity to senior employees or employees with legitimate power who were harsh to certain employees of or with dissimilar genders, qualifications, races, ethnicities, personalities and ages. One participant better captured the views of other participants as follows:

'some people with legitimate power made it difficult for other ethnic groups, racial, or gender to progress or develop in their department, by associating with bullies with whom they shared demographic similarities and avoid addressing bullying cases.'
(P2, male, 15 years)

The foregoing remarks reveal that senior employees condone perpetrators' actions based on their similarity in terms of some demographics aforementioned. Mokgolo and Barnard (2019) argue that sometimes, it appears genuine for employees to defend and protect their counterpart who is implicated in bullying perhaps simply because they share the same biographical characteristics, however, occur advertently or inadvertently. It was also learnt that 'management often characterised bullying incidents as a miscommunication or personality clashes between the target and the line manager/supervisor' (P5, female, 6 years). This viewpoint may be attributed to power imbalances manifested within diversity dynamics in the workplace. Therefore, diversity embracement interventions, for example, sensitivity and rehabilitation training, should become a criterion in identifying and combating bullying in the workplace. It can be argued that diversity is not a perennial denominator; instead, diversity

may galvanise bullying experiences related to individual, intimidation and work-associated bullying when it is not embraced in the work context. This finding corroborates Nafei's (2019, p. 110) finding that unbalanced incentives for employees, loss of employees' interest in promotion or career development, overlooking deserving employees, top-middle-low management ratification of bullying tactics at work, repeated unresolved organisational conflicts, and poor employees work and social life balance are correlated with individual-intimidation-and-work associated workplace bullying in academic institutions. Consequently, these dimensionalities puzzle HR practitioners' aptitude to spy and address bullying signs and forms. Inegbedion et al. (2020) aver that for organisations to disengage any counterproductive behaviour in the workplace robustly, they should place value on comprehending diversity dimensionalities that manipulate employee uniqueness at work. This invigorates appreciation of diversity, working relations, inclusion and accountability and recedes its impacts on employees' health, dignity, wellbeing and performance (Dzurec et al., 2017; Hodgins et al., 2020; HutchSalin et al., 2018).

Absence of an anti-bullying policy: The lack of a defined bullying policy exposes management's lack of commitment towards preventing or effectively prohibiting bullying behaviour in the workplace (Hodgins et al., 2020; Salin et al., 2018). The HR function has a great potential to prevent and manage destructive behaviours such as bullying in the workplace (Salin et al., 2018). On the other hand, the absence of a workplace bullying policy jeopardises the entire nature of HR practitioners' roles (see Rockett et al., 2017; Sheehan et al., 2018). The challenge faced by institutions is the development of an anti-bullying policy that enables HR practitioners to combat bullying practices decisively and additionally render post-trauma support for them. Anti-workplace bullying policies and interventions must establish shared norms and standards (Namie, 2017) and intensely prescribe that bullying is unethical and unacceptable inside and outside the organisation (Hodgins et al., 2020). Human resources practitioners concurred that their anti-bullying policies are implicit in what really manifests as bullying at work and avenues to resolve it; in fact, an anti-bullying policy was confused with a harassment policy. Sheehan et al. (2018, p. 21) found that 'when the HR practitioners are experiencing role conflict or competing expectations of their roles, their power of meaning is low and the opportunity to contribute to decision-making is curtailed'. Thus, their power is diminished because their organisation does not have a robust policy to standardise their actions and further feels inadequately unauthorised to do so. Hodgins et al.'s (2020) study postulates that a lack of an anti-bullying policy can foster a management style and culture of abuse of power over less powerful persons, generating opportunities for acts of bullying and rendering the HR component ineffective in dealing with destructive behaviour at work.

Several studies maintain that straightforward anti-bullying policies and remedial interventions are the major preventative

prerequisites to discourage bullying and its potential adverse consequences in the organisation (Einarsen et al., 2018; Hodgins et al., 2020). The study examined practitioners from HR service departments of two universities in the Gauteng province. The HR service functions include recruitment, HR planning, HR development, health, safety and wellness, performance management, compensation and benefits as well as the management of employee relations and compliance. Organisational interventions such as employee assistance programmes (EAPs), trauma debriefing and stress management to support the HR practitioners, and sensitivity and rehabilitation training to transform bullies or employees who are resistant to diversity embracement, are in dire need. These interventions could be used as covert HR interventions to equip HR practitioners and other employees to discourage workplace bullying effectively. These views are consistent with Nzonzo's (2017) assertion that a specialised EAP for HR practitioners is paramount for improving their health, dignity, wellbeing and prospects in managing bullying in the organisation. Lastly, this article further suggests that drafting an organisation's anti-bullying policy to transform the culture and climate of bullying would not effectively combat workplace bullying; rather, different sectors should collaborate in drafting and describing what a bullying policy should entail, particularly in countries where workplace bullying is or unlikely to be regulated. This view is shared by some African and international scholars, who argue that policies alone will not effectively eliminate bullying across organisations, but that the reinforcement of anti-bullying policies and interventions can robustly embolden organisations to combat bullying and its harmful consequences (e.g. Cowan & Bochantin, 2018; Cunniff & Mostert, 2012; Djurkovic et al., 2021; Einarsen et al., 2018; Hodgins et al., 2020; Mangolotho, 2020; Mokgolo, 2017; Motsei & Nkomo, 2016; Namie & Namie, 2015; Smit, 2021; Steinman & Van Rooij, 2012).

Proposed framework to manage workplace bullying

Based on the findings and integrated literature, a framework for managing workplace bullying dynamics above and below the surface in the workplace is proposed. As illustrated in Figure 3, the framework shows the interconnection of themes and provides a panoramic insight into HR practitioners' roles, voices of reason and contextual phases of bullying anomalies. Bullying anomalies and forms of relational behaviour originate from a psychodynamic context, and that is *above the surface behaviour* (Cilliers, 2012). In the context of this study, bullying is deeply entrenched in *below the surface behaviour* (Cilliers, 2012) and is accompanied by uncertainties about the degree of bullying occurrences. Below surface bullying is amplified by covert power imbalances and role dynamics, thus making it complex or unnoticeable for the HR practitioner to effectively singularise the target from the bully.

The framework establishes the HR practitioner's role in addressing bullying perplexities. As per Mokgolo (2017), such roles are to:

[C]haracterise bullying overt behavioural symptoms; cognisant of its primordial and covert power unevenness and role dynamics; and investigate the extent of complaints contra the elements of workplace bullying as a criterion. (p. 162)

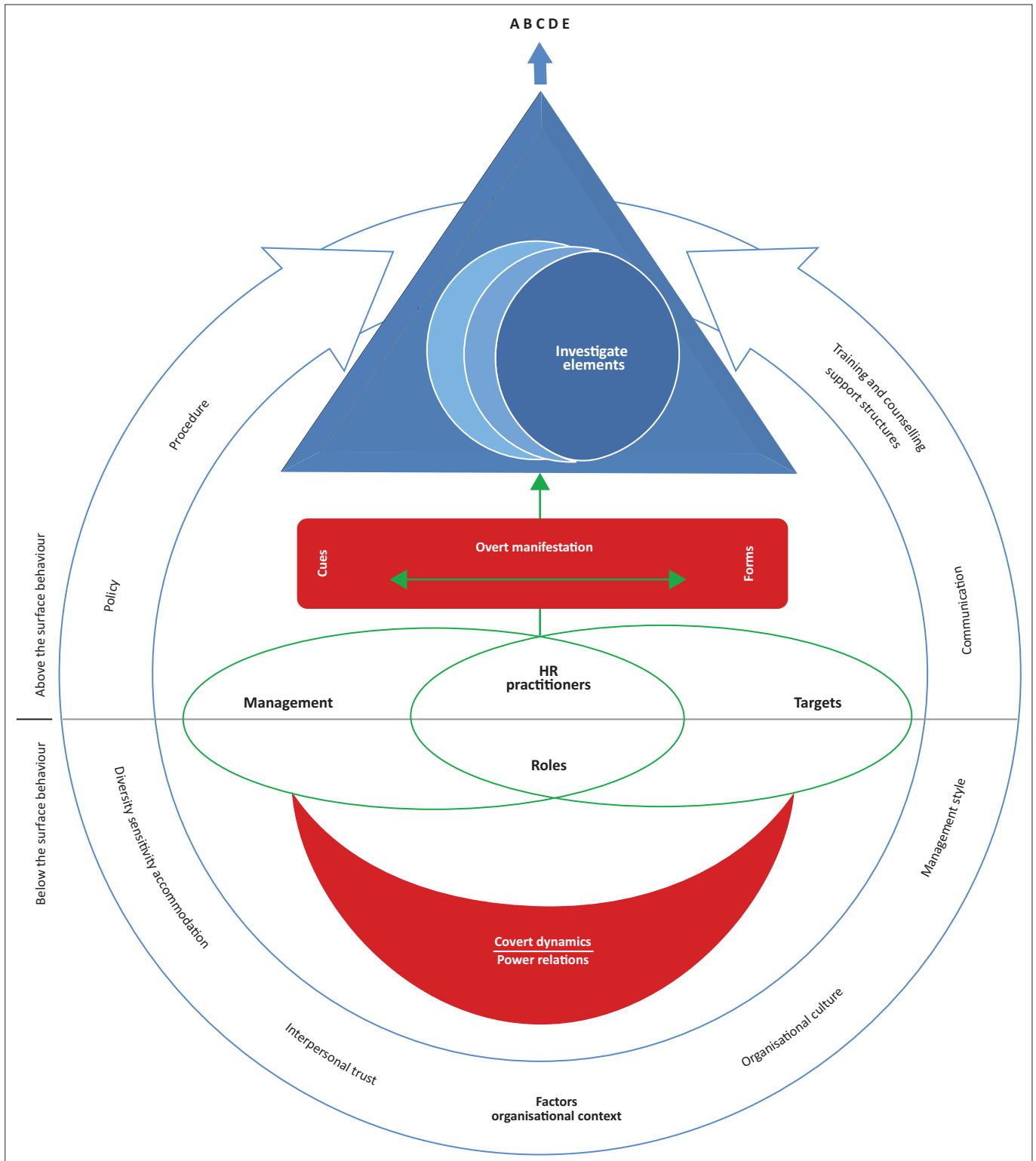
It also emphasises the importance of the organisation's responsibility in fostering a supportive atmosphere and empowering HR practitioners' roles to deal with workplace bullying. Congruent with Mokgolo (2017, p. 163), the responsibility includes:

- the establishment of an organisational culture through its management style that reflects a zero-tolerance of bullying and reasonably promotes interpersonal trust, diversity sensitivity vigilance and integration and constructive employee, manager and HR relationships
- to establish clear and transparent communication channels and opportunities
- to provide relevant training and counselling interventions and support structures
- to have an anti-bullying policy and procedures in place.

Finally, the framework illustrates how behavioural unorthodoxy manifests itself above and below the surface in an organisation, group and individual. It is important to recognise that behavioural dynamics above and below the surface are mutually dependent (Cilliers, 2012; Norris, 2012). The interplay of both surfaces may assist the HR practitioner to recognise, develop a better understanding of, and address a workplace bullying issue with greater confidence when considered collectively.

Implications

Workplace bullying is a chronic and sensitive problem that tends to instigate dilemmas in the workplace. It gives rise to the challenges HR practitioners face, including its contribution to the complexities of their binary role, lopsided power relations and organisational context factors emanating from dealing with diversified people with incongruent expectations. These challenges could undermine the HR practitioners' role if compassionate efforts are not attained to manage the inimical impact of bullying. This calls for establishing a comprehensive zero-tolerant workplace bullying policy to obliterate enactments of bullying above and below the surface, thereby nourishing all employees' wellbeing, health, dignity, fulfilment, working relations, performance and meliorating organisational climate. The implication is that line management (same as HR practitioners) should be responsible for bullying prevention. They should also ensure that applicatory policies and procedures are meritoriously enforced, regardless of level, rank or status. Organisation management should then institutionalise harmonious, 'tailor-made support initiatives and interventions to overcome the negative impact of bullying on the HR practitioners, employees and the organisation through educating, sensitivity training and coaching' (Mokgolo, 2017, p. 172).



Source: Adopted from Mokgolo, M. (2017). *Workplace bullying: A human resource practitioner perspective*. Unpublished Doctoral thesis. University of South Africa, Pretoria. South Africa, Retrieved from <https://uir.unisa.ac.za/handle/10500/23848>, p. 134

HR, human resources.

FIGURE 3: Proposed framework to manage workplace bullying.

Limitations

This study was narrowed to HR practitioners only in two universities in the Gauteng province. Therefore, future research may extend this study to other universities outside the province. Another limitation is that this study has

developed a scientific framework to manage workplace bullying above and below the surface only from HR practitioners' perspectives in South Africa. Further research is necessary to duplicate and test the practicality of the proposed framework in South Africa and other countries.

Recommendations

This study proposed developing an anti-workplace bullying policy and EAP as interventions to eradicate and effectively manage bullying situations maximally. Therefore, there is a need to examine the efficacy of the policy and EAP interventions to embrace diversity to prevent, reduce and expunge workplace bullying circumstances. The findings are context-specific and may have restricted transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The transferability of this study will be affirmed if it is extraordinarily duplicated in most South African universities. The perspective presented is validated by the relevance and usefulness of the study to the readers (Patton, 2002).

Conclusion

The study proffers that HR practitioners' roles remain dichotomised between serving dissimilar stakeholders with diametric expectations and protecting employees from bullying circumstances. The proposed framework to manage workplace bullying above and below the surface from HR practitioners' perspectives has both pragmatic and theoretical noteworthiness. From a pragmatic orientation, organisation management, practitioners and employees can be unconditionally alert about bullying multiplicities. This study affirms Nafei's (2019, p. 101) finding that all employees regardless of level should be conscientious 'of the concept (cues), types, reasons, methods, influential factors and consequences, and remedies of workplace bullying for their organisations'. To expedite robust holistic determinations and preventative measures, anti-bullying policies and EAP become paramount in embracing diversity and effectively reprehending bullying situations. The theoretical locality provides substantial insight into the considerable alloy of observant and unobservant predisposition dynamics and organisational context factors above and below the surface interconnected with power imbalances and the paradoxical incongruity of HR practitioners' role in an organisational system. This combination of the power dynamics, roles and factors at play: (1) has acute ramifications on HR practitioners' deftness to circumvent, administrate and investigate bullying incidences at universities; (2) sways employees' or targets' mistrustful and resentful attitudes towards HR practitioners and (3) lastly, makes the HR practitioner feel de-legitimised, bullied, victimised and ultimately finding their work stressful. This study adds a noticeable contribution to the knowledge of workplace bullying, HR management and remedial interventions from HR practitioners' perspectives in South Africa's higher education context.

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Authors' contributions

M.M.M. executed the study under the supervision of Antoni Barnard, University of South Africa and wrote the original draft manuscripts and contributed conceptually to the design, data analysis and results. E.M.C. contributed to the review and synthesis of the final analysis for this manuscript.

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Data availability

To ensure confidentiality and guard the anonymity of the participants and their organisations, sharing of data is not ethically feasible in this study because of the sensitivity of the research phenomenon. Data are only available on request from the first author, M.M.M., with the permission of the participating organisations.

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