A systems psychodynamic description of organisational bullying experiences

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Orientation: Organisational bullying experiences manifest themselves as an intense unconscious systemic dynamic involving the bully, the victim and the organisational culture. The relatedness between the objects is characterised by valences and mutual defence mechanisms such as splitting, projection and projective identification.

Research purpose: The purpose of this research was to describe organisational bullying experiences from the system psychodynamic perspective.

Motivation for the study: Individual psychology tends to simplify organisational bullying by focussing on the bully's symptomatic behaviour. Systems psychodynamic thinking focuses on the behavioural dynamics in the relationship between the bully and victim, and the relatedness of both with the organisational system.

Research design, approach and method: Qualitative and descriptive research, using six participants as case studies, was undertaken. Data was gathered through Free Association Narrative Interviewing and analysed using discourse analysis.

Main findings: Three themes manifested themselves, namely, snakes and hyenas, a complex interconnected dyad, and the institutionalisation of bullying. The research hypothesis integrating these three themes was presented.

Practical/managerial implications: In resolving organisational bullying Industrial Organisational psychologists need to pursue this phenomenon not only in terms of its symptoms, but in a holistic, systemic and role related manner addressing all of its parts.

Contribution/value-add: The systemic understanding of organisational bullying implies the complexity of studying the behaviour of all parts – the bully, the victim, their dyadic relationship as well as how bullying is institutionalised in the organisational setting, climate and culture.

Introduction

Bullying has a fascinating and damaging unconscious life of its own that works below the surface of its conscious psychological manifestation and its effect in organisations. This life functions below the surface of individual, dyadic, team and organisational behaviour, and is filled with anxiety that is projected to and fro between the role players. The purpose of this projected anxiety is to avoid feelings of badness.

Bullying has been researched in education (Blase & Blase, 2002; Cemalogly, 2007; De Wet & Jacobs, 2008; Johnson, Thompson, Wilkinson, Walsh, Balding & Wright, 2002), nursing (Hutchinson, Vickers, Jackson & Wilkens, 2006; Lewis, 2006; Yildirim, Yildirim & Timucin, 2007), universities (Lewis, 2004) and even in cyber space (Kowalski, Limber & Aqatston, 2007). The extensive literature on organisational bullying is reported in daily newspapers (Beeld, 2010), popular management journals (Lewis, 2009; Naidoo, 2008; Ncongwane, 2010a; 2010b), voluminous textbooks (Bassman, 1992; Fox & Spector, 2005), as well as in subject journals (Chamberlin, Novotney, Packard & Price, 2008; Crawford, 1999; Djurkovic, McCormack & Casimir, 2006; Duffy & Sperry, 2007; Harvey, Heames, Richey & Leonard, 2006; Lewis, 1999; Liefooghe & Olafsson, 1999; Marais & Herman, 1997; Martin, 2000; Meyers, 2006a; 2006b; Oade, 2009; Pietersen, 2007; Randall, 1997; Rayner, 1999; Rayner, Sheehan & Barker, 1999; Stambor, 2006; Zapf, 1999).

Although workplace bullying manifested itself in primitive times, research about it has tripled since the 1990s (Agervold, 2007; Chamberlin, Novotney, Packard & Price, 2008). This is ascribed to the demands, in the 21st century, of work focussed on high performance, organisational re-design,

re-structuring, re-engineering, alignment and sustainability, which formed a new breeding ground for systemic bullying (Meyers, 2006b). The international prevalence and impact of bullying came to the fore when the US President, Barack Obama, addressed the American Psychological Association (APA) at the White House Bullying Conference on 10 March 2011 (Munsey, 2011). He strongly supported the prevention of and intervention into bullying as ways to secure hope for victims of bullying.

The literature on bullying before 2000 tended to describe it in a linear manner as learned and socially reinforced behaviour, manifesting itself as a deliberate intent to cause physical and or psychological distress, through the aggressive exercise and misuse of power for psychological gratification at the expense of the other (Agervold, 2007; Marais & Herman, 1997; Randall, 1997). The bully is described as an individual in an elevated hierarchical position such as a supervisor, manager or leader, alternatively the bully is represented as a group. The victim is also described as an individual or a group. The bully's behaviour is interpreted as an acting out of his or her low self-esteem, frustrated growth needs or hostility, as opposed to their complementary behaviour of friendliness. This behaviour manifests itself as physical, mental, emotional and/or verbal abuse, for example, irrational, unacceptable, disrespectful, offensive, humiliating and intimidating behaviour towards the victim, that often occurs in front of others. This includes shouting, using bad language, and disrupting the victims' work life and workflow. The intended result is to render the victim powerless, ridiculed and incompetent, and to strip them of self-esteem and self-confidence (Bassman, 1992; Marais & Herman, 1997; Randall, 1997). The literature on the personality traits of the bully is vast (Adams, 2000), although relatively little is published on the behaviour of the victim.

A relatively new dynamic discourse on organisational bullying refers to the power relations between the bully and the victim (Martin, 2000; Meyers, 2006a; 2006b; Rayner, 1999; Rayner, Hoel & Cooper, 2002). This discourse researches the dark side of leadership (Blase & Blase, 2002), by either framing the relationship as two independent parts (Adams, 2000; Archer, 1999), or studying the parts as a systemic whole (University of London, 2011; Rayner, Hoel & Cooper, 2002; White, 2004). The last mentioned research follows the systems psychodynamic tradition that suggests that bullying represents a complex interconnectedness between different objects, which is acted out by the bully and contained by the victim, both in their organisational roles. This bullying takes place in an organisational culture and climate filled with emotional toxicity (Fox & Spector, 2005). The underlying assumption is that employees unconsciously act out larger organisational systemic issues. The evidence suggests that bullying can be institutionalised and that the phenomenon needs to be understood as a representation of organisational culture.

The systems psychodynamic perspective, that is mentioned, studies the extraordinary and sometimes seemingly odd and out-of-place behaviour in the organisation, and also its meaning and deep motives, wherein anxiety leads to the blurring of boundaries between the rational and irrational (Lawrence, 1999; Sievers, 2009; Vansina & Vansina-Cobbaert, 2008). This is the behaviour that normally hurts the system (individual, team or larger parts of the organisation) which may lie in the nature of the (unconscious) group dynamics and in the organisational factors such as culture, structure, processes and systems which could create conditions in which bullying is fostered. This focus provides clues with which to understand the underlying and unconscious anxieties which are theoretically informed by the manifesting defences, power relationships, envy, collusion, transitional space, transference and counter transference (Armstrong, 2005; Gould, Stapley & Stein, 2001; 2004). This perspective and its research outcomes have added to the understanding of bullying in education. On the other hand, relatively little research has been undertaken on the experiences of victims of bullying in organisations (Stapley, 2006; White, 2004). No related South African research could be traced.

The purpose of this research was to describe organisational bullying experiences from the system psychodynamic perspective. In instances where individual psychology framed bullying as a problem with one person's misbehaviour, the systemic perspective is interested in how the whole organisation is involved, and how the system's dynamics play out between the bully and the victim in their relationships and relatedness.

The systems psychodynamic literature describes bullying as a macro systemic competition for power, privilege and status played out as an interpersonal and intergroup behavioural dynamic (on the meso level) between a bully and a victim, with valences to become involved in a process of testing and matching power against others to establish, enhance and protect a place in a system (Rayner, Hoel & Cooper, 2002; White, 1999). The destructive nature of the bullying system causes high levels of anxiety in the organisation, which is defended against through a complex splitting dynamic between attachment–detachment, inclusion–exclusion and acceptance–repulsion (Stapley, 1996; 2006).

The defensive process entails the following:

1. splitting
2. denial
3. projection
4. projective identification

Splitting: This is a defence against persecutory anxiety, which manifests itself when the system experiences performance anxiety and fear of failure (Sievers, 2009), that often results in shame (Lewis, 2004; Mollon, 2004). Anxiety is reduced by differentiating between good and bad parts of the self (Stapley, 2006).

Denial: This is a defence against the bad parts in the self or an external danger (Freud, 1921) that functions by disowning the bad part of the experience by using the fantasy, that it no

longer exists. Anxiety is reduced only temporarily because in reality the so-called bad remains part of the system's unconscious (Stapley, 1996).

Projection: Following on splitting and denial, projection refers to the ejection of the unwanted or disowned parts, feelings, behaviours and experiences inherent in the system's unconscious, *onto* another object, and then the projector imagines that the part belongs to the other (Huffington, Armstrong, Halton, Hoyle & Pooley, 2004).

Projective identification: Following on from projection onto an object, this is a defence of projecting the disowned parts *into* the other. The projector's unwanted parts enter the other's psychic system, leading to the recipient's identification with the thoughts, feelings and behaviour of these parts that are perceived by the projector as belonging to the recipient. Thus the behaviour of the receiver is altered according to the needs of the projector (Campbell & Huffington, 2008; Stapley, 2006).

Bully dynamics

The bully's dynamics manifest themselves as masochism, sadism, narcissism, rivalry and envy (Gaitanidis, 2007; Kets de Vries, 2006; 2007; Rayner, Hoel & Cooper, 2002; Sandler, Person & Fonagy, 2004; Schwartz, 1990). The bully's position, as the receiver of hostility in the masochistic position from parents, formed the grounds for him or her to become the bully in the sadistic position. In masochism the individual is not satisfied unless the pattern of being hurt is repeated. On the unconscious and irrational levels the individual experiences satisfaction in the realisation that they deserve to be treated badly. In sadism the impression is that no matter what the child did wrong, in the parent's eyes they were always loved. Thus, children learned that they were the centre of the world, accepted by all and successful. From this position the need develops to control others and make them subservient. This implies a fusion in the mind of the phenomenal role (how others see the individual) with the experiential role (how the individual sees the self) (Obholzer & Roberts, 1994). Narcissism leads to the projection of anger onto the other who does not comply in his or her own drama around competition for acceptance (Gaitanidis, 2007). The individual feels threatened by any real or imagined opposition for popularity and acceptance which sparks dynamics of envy (Huffington, *et al.*, 2004). This insecurity, which they experience about their own competence, is projected onto and into their perceived rivals, who are then used to contain the psychic material on their behalf (Adams, 2000).

Although bullies exhibit psychopathic tendencies, they are not classified as such (Babiak & Hare, 2006). The profile of the organisational bully excludes the qualities of the aggressive psychopath (being totally egocentric and almost beyond help), but includes those of the creative psychopath (being successful in work, interpersonal relationships and with some capacity for emotional involvement). Bullies are unable to realise the effect of their actions on others, do not see the

self as others do, and do not realise that others may think differently to them. It may be hypothesised that they do not have access to their phenomenal role or projections onto them (Obholzer & Roberts, 1994). Their narcissism manifests itself as self-righteousness, making them immune against guilt if they hurt others, and not take responsibility for their own thoughts and actions (Speziale-Bagliacca, 2004). The driving force is the desire to have one's needs met at all times and in all circumstances (Schwartz, 1990).

Victim dynamics

The victim dynamic is embedded in childhood (White, 2004). The residual experiences of childhood psychological aggression, are repeated in adulthood. The aggression is experienced as hurt and humiliation, ranging from overt outbursts of anger to covert and subtle hostility, for example where one child is preferred above the other (White, 1999; 2004). The individual develops a valence to take on the role of emotional victim by picking up the weaknesses of the other and become influenced by them. These weaknesses remind the individual of their parents' traits and a repetition compulsion follows (Blackman, 2004). The buried injustices carried from the past, erupt in the present, placing victims in a double bind with their out-of-control dynamics.

On the one hand, victims experience being filled up with the bully's projected feelings of worthlessness, incompetence, self-doubt, powerlessness, despair and even that they need to be treated badly as evidence of a form of inner madness (Kets de Vries, 2006). On the other hand, victims experience their own and more real feelings of rage, anger, bewilderment, shock and disbelief about what is happening to them, followed by self blame (White, 2001). The victims become preoccupied with revenge and whishing the bully away. Flight (silence, turning the aggression in on the self, sucking up, resentment, quitting, hoping the situation will pass) and fight (fear, anger, confrontation, whistle blowing, grievance procedures) are the victim's coping options (Cytrynbaum & Noumair, 2004). Unfortunately both methods represent a sense of failure and enforce the double bind (Schwartz, 1990). The victim's control of their resulting anger leads to inhibition, lethargy, paralysis, hopelessness and depression (White, 2004). Victims generally receive limited systemic support – colleagues tend to pacify rather than take action. The fantasy is that appeasing the bully will cease the attack, whereas, in reality this response increases the likelihood of more attacks (White, 2001).

Systemic dynamics

In their unconscious search for recognition and containing relationships, both bully and victim do not realise the futility of their behaviour – they are searching for the same thing (Adams, 2000; Lawrence, 1999). As a result, these behaviours manifest themselves as a cycle of conflict. White (2001; 2004) refers to this cycle as mirroring the patterns of a biological life cycle from embryo to death and back to the embryonic (University of London; 2011), manifesting as follows:

1. the embryonic stage
2. the trigger
3. loyalty
4. dance of death.

The embryonic stage

Before the bullying starts, there is a potential (embryonic) bully and a potential (embryonic) victim – both are vulnerable in their unfulfilled need for recognition. Within specific dynamic environmental conditions, both develop into their predestined and entrapped roles in the bullying relationship, idealising their need for control, domination and recognition. The victim experiences independence of mind as loneliness and then seeks recognition through subservice and submission.

The trigger

Both embryonic objects are awakened by a triggering event in the system which causes frustration, unhappiness, envy and hate. The bully's loss of control and frustration is exaggerated into thoughts of impending crises and overwhelming anxiety. As a means of psychic defence, the bully splits the experience into a good–bad relationship, which Adams (2000) refers to as Jekyll and Hyde. Bullies need a container for their anxiety and target various objects to test their ability to contain the anxiety, for example a vulnerable colleague with a valence for recognition seeking. Once identified, the attack begins. Consciously the victim may be set up to fail (through criticism, exclusion, or denying him or her information). Unconsciously, the bully's split–off undesirable parts are projected onto and into the victim, to the extent that the victim feels the pain on the bully's behalf.

Loyalty

The victim's strong need for recognition leads to their use of loyalty as a defence against the attack (Oade, 2009) in the fantasy that their boundaries will thus be restored. This implies a persistent effort to please the bully and deny the reality. In an attempt to posses the seemingly good object, the victim starts to idealise the bully.

Dance of death

The bully and the victim are psychically intertwined as if in a frenetic and parasitic dance (White, 2004). The exhausted victim gives up his or her idealisation and experiences the bully as persecutory. As their interpersonal boundaries blur, their identities become intertwined and the bully now experiences the victim as persecutory. The bully introjects innocence, projects guilt into the victim who identifies with the projection and starts blaming the self for the bullying. Thus the bully has successfully isolated the victim who now contains the bad and incompetent projections.

Although the bully may seem to cope well, the constant repression of guilt and shame (Lewis, 2004) brings feelings of psychic deadness, and further splitting between good and bad as a continuing defence (Speziale-Bagliacca, 2004). The bully's unsuccessful effort to be relieved of the self-hatred causes a repetition compulsion to find another victim. White (2004) showed how these feelings may manifest themselves in depression and even suicidal tendencies. Victims experience a loss of identity (White, 1999) and without psychological support they may fall into a post-traumatic cycle of reliving the experiences. White (2004) mentioned that bullies may continue the fight because of the previous successful bullying experience and thus bully and victim are trapped in the repetition compulsion.

The prevailing literature on organisational bullying points to various contextually determined and socio-technical actions towards breaking the above cycle and to establish firm boundaries and contain anxiety (Cytrynbaum & Noumair, 2004). The technical inputs, mentioned in the literature, refer to structural changes, role re-defining and job re-analysis. The socio-inputs refer, on the macro level, to interventions by senior management, providing a reflective space for all involved colleagues, efforts to understand the manifesting group dynamics by involving the collective and psychological health and safety programmes; and on the micro level they refer to counselling, giving positive feedback, taking a holiday and meditation (Randall, 1997; White, 2004).

The research problem was formulated as follows: how do the above characteristics of bullying, and their cycle, manifest themselves in the experiences of employees being bullied by their managers? The objective was to describe the victim's experiences of their own behaviour, the bully's behaviour as well as the organisational system's involvement.

The potential value contributed by this research was to add to the systemic knowledge about bullying as experienced by the victim, instead of simplifying bullying to a random and individual activity performed by an angry person, who is often out of control and who needs to be tolerated until he or she feels different.

The rest of the article is structured as follows: the research design is presented with reference to the research approach, and strategy. This is followed by the research method consisting of the setting, roles of the researcher, sampling method, data collection, recording and analysis. Lastly, the strategies employed, to ensure quality data, are mentioned. Thereafter the findings are presented in three themes. In the discussion the findings were integrated within the research hypothesis, which were followed by the conclusion, recommendations, limitations and suggestions for further research.

Research design
Research approach

A qualitative and descriptive research approach was chosen (De Vos, Strydom, Fouché & Delport, 2002) in order to study the manifestation of bullying as a behavioural phenomenon, thus answering the *how* and *why* questions of the experience in a thick description. Hermeneutics was chosen as the

research paradigm (Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006) applied towards the interpretation of bullying experiences, and double hermeneutics (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009) was applied towards interpreting the data from the systems psychodynamic stance and to develop knowledge.

Research strategy

Case studies (Chamberlayne, Bornat & Apitzsch, 2004) were used to empirically investigate the phenomenon of bullying in a real-life context. This strategy allowed for a detailed examination of the manifesting behaviours involving multiple sources of information that are rich in the research context (Creswell, 2003). Cases were seen as intrinsic (providing an understanding of the behaviour for the interest of the researcher and the organisation) and as instrumental (towards developing knowledge) (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Research method

Research setting

The research was set within various organisations and focussed on individuals who had experienced being bullied by their immediate line managers.

Entrée and establishing researcher roles

The researcher took up the roles of systems psychodynamic interviewer (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2010) and analysand (Schafer, 2003), using the self as instrument (Watts, 2009). He is a psychologist with training and experience in this methodology and fulfilled the requirements for this role as stipulated by Brunner, Nutkevitch and Sher (2006).

Sampling

Convenient (Breverton & Millward, 2004) or opportunistic sampling (Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006) was used. The first two participants contacted the researcher with the request to speak to a psychologist about their experiences with their 'difficult bosses' and to find out what they should do about their situations. Through them, another three participants come to the fore. The last participant approached the researcher at a conference. The six participants included two academics (both were White, one male and one female), one Afrikaans Church minister (a White male), and three senior managers (a White male from a bank and two Black females, one from a private hospital and the other from a government department).

Data collection method

For each participant, a 90 minute interview was scheduled in a boardroom in their organisations. Free association narrative interviewing (FANI) was used (Boydell, in Clarke & Hoggett, 2009), based on four principles (Holloway & Jefferson, 2010): firstly, only using open ended questions; secondly, eliciting stories towards analysing the unconscious processes of transference, projection and projective identification; thirdly, avoiding clichéd, counter intuitive why–questions thereby avoiding explanations about facts;

and fourthly, using the participants' ordering and phrasing which demands careful listening, and follow-up questions without offering interpretations and imposing structure onto the story. The aim of the interview was to understand the relationship between the participant and his or her line manager, and it started with the invitation to 'tell me about your relationship with your manager'. The method allows participants to structure the interview and its content whilst moving between the paranoid-schizoid (the splitting of the object) and the depressive positions (the good parts being preserved in the self) (Holloway & Jefferson, 2010). Included in the interview method is the notion of the defended subject (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009) which acknowledges the unconscious merging of identities between interviewer and participant.

Recording of data

Following Hinshelwood and Skogstad's (2005) guidelines, each participant's interview narrative was tape recorded, followed immediately afterwards with the researcher making notes on the interview process, and his subjective experiences during and after the interview. The data was typed and kept securely.

Data analysis

Two complementary approaches were used, namely, discursive psychology and psycho-dynamically informed discourse analysis (Boydell, in Clarke & Hoggett, 2009). Simple hermeneutics was used to interpret the discursive data and double hermeneutics to interpret the systems psychodynamic behaviour (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2010). Firstly, single cases were analysed to stay close to its surprising elements before, secondly, moving to cross-case analysis and the emergence of themes (Holloway & Jefferson, 2010).

Strategies employed to ensure quality data

At the start of each interview, the aim of the project, the method of interviewing, the tape recording, manner of interpretation, and the confidential treatment of the data were explained (Terre Blanche, *et al.*, 2006). All six participants gave their informed consent to the research.

Ethicality, in the interviews, refers to concern, care and respect for the participants and their thoughts and feelings about their personal (and sometimes contentious) and work related issues, as well as their responsibility towards scientific data interpretation (Holloway & Jefferson, 2010). Clarke and Hoggett (2009) mentioned the impact of the defended subject and the defended researcher. Because both participant and researcher were anxious about the content and its implications, the researcher needed to consider his own emotional responses to each participant and to not let parts of one merge with the other. It was therefore important to suspend memory, desire and judgement during the interviews (Cytrynbaum & Noumair, 2004).

The notion of trustworthiness was based on credibility and validity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Credibility was assured in terms of the competence of the researcher in systems psychodynamic research. The study evidenced strong and believable validity in its in-depth (psychological) description, which revealed the complexities of the manifesting themes.

The interpretations were peer reviewed (Brewerton & Milward, 2004; Camic, Rhodes & Yardley, 2003). Two independent psychologists, to whom the theoretical model is well-known, were asked to investigate the dependability of the findings (which were found to be positive). Both peer reviewers agreed that the data reached a point of saturation and were responsibly interpreted according to the above strategy and method.

Reporting

The research findings were reported per manifesting theme. In the discussion, the themes were interpreted and a hypothesis formulated for bullying as an organisational phenomenon, for the bully and for the victim. This was followed by the conclusions, recommendations and limitations.

Findings

Three themes manifested themselves, namely, snakes and hyenas, a complex interconnected dyad, and the institutionalisation of bullying.

Snakes and hyenas

The managers' behaviour corresponded to what Babiak and Hare (2006) referred to as *snakes in suits* and Marais and Herman (1997) as *hyenas at work*. Intrapersonally they exhibited high levels of 'irritation and/or frustration' and 'lots of anger'. Participants described their behaviour as 'you could see the anger in his eyes', 'he looked quite scary', 'he acted like a schoolboy and/or a *prima donna*'. Interpersonally the managers acted with high levels of insensitivity and hostility, and violated the other's personal boundaries as if 'he wanted to dominate' and 'control me' – 'he always had to be right' and 'have the last word'. Participants reported how they were being 'humiliated', 'shouted at', 'in my own office' and 'in meetings', 'blamed for things that went wrong' in aspects 'that [were] not even my job'. Then they started to feel 'bad about things' – 'I was not quite sure about what' or 'why'.

A complex interconnected dyad

Participants' stories gave significant evidence of the cycle of conflict as proposed by White (2004).

The embryonic stage was described as 'like a pregnancy' which 'I only realised the impact of much later' when 'the thing was beyond return'. Participants reported that before the bullying started, they received accolades and prizes for exceptional performance, which the manager congratulated them for in public. At that time they were not suspicious at all, but in hindsight they started to 'put 2 and 2 together' and realised that the 'air was brewing with something'.

Triggers were described as 'related to technical issues' such as the 're-design of the department', introducing a 'fairly large change in the committee's work' and/or based on relational aspects, such as 'the employment of a new colleague', the choosing of a new departmental representative and 'when I asked for being [sic] relieved from a specific divisional task'. Participants described how a supposedly 'emotional non-event' turned into their managers' 'losing it', and 'exploding in a fit of rage'. The evidence suggested that managers were threatened by participants' competence, mostly in maintaining good relationships. The managers responded either covertly by 'subtly isolating' and 'excusing' participants 'from a new committee', 'a tea room conversation', or by 'denying my inputs in a standard report', or overtly by 'attacking me out of nowhere', 'completely by surprise' which 'left me speechless' – 'he just went berserk'. After the trigger event, participants felt 'amazed' and 'bewildered' – 'I constantly asked myself, what happened here'. They reported feeling 'violated', but 'unable to feel anything else', such as frustration, anger or hurt. Two participants reported seeing the manager afterwards 'just going on as if nothing happened', 'joking with others', and 'not perturbed by his behaviour'. They called this not knowing whether he is Dr Jekyll or Mr Hyde (Adams, 2000). Next, participants experienced overwhelming fear of 'him repeating the outburst', 'me being humiliated again' and 'being overlooked in a meeting again'.

After most attacks participants were 'left on my own' by the manager as well as colleagues which 'was perhaps the worst, they just turned away and went on as of [sic] nothing happened'. Participants reported on their surprise and bewilderment at the attacks, as well as their powerlessness to defend themselves ('I could not think of anything to say'; 'I am a good person', 'wanting to do good', 'progress in my career' and 'I like to work here').

Participants reported being unaware of other colleagues being targeted in the same way. 'It was as if she only singled me out'. One participant remembered that someone else was treated badly some time ago ('humiliated in front of us all') but 'nothing came from that – now I'm not surprised'.

In terms of their interpersonal relationships, participants shared the following. 'I had to get away', 'take a walk', and 'sit in a quiet place' to 'regain my sanity'. Their colleagues who witnessed the attack acted by ignoring the event and the impact – they 'just went on as if nothing happened'. It was as if they 'conveniently forgot' about 'what was so shocking to me'. It was as if 'no-one remembered or cared about what she did'. Some participants voiced their experiences to other colleagues, friends and family who were seemingly shocked, and then they started to defend their inability to help, in their own different ways. For example, they challenged the participant ('what are you going to do about this'), blamed ('she told me I am to be blamed because I was looking for

trouble' – which 'felt like a double humiliation' and 'salt in the wound'), and defended the manager (with reference to his or her stress and difficulties). Two participants reported the triggering event to a senior manager – they were told 'to forget the incident', that 'I was overreacting' and 'oversensitive'.

Responses by colleagues and even friends made participants realise that they will 'not be supported by anyone' – even 'those who were present' and 'heard everything'. Participants reported their realisation that they needed to 'pull myself together', and 'move forward'. In hindsight they realised that they colluded with the systems defences, 'denied the issue' and 'turned it into support' for the organisation. Thus, in looking for help, they turned towards people who were loyal to the system and even the manager. In hindsight participants reflected on their 'fear of another *klap* (smack)' and as a defence they started to 'think positive thoughts' about the manager. They reported trying to 'put myself in his shoes' to understand what happened with them – 'now I find that bizarre'.

Finally participants reported their exhaustion, 'being worn down', confusion, isolation, hopelessness and worthlessness. They reported reliving the experiences regularly and vividly, and that their minds 'just keep going round and round'. They felt trapped as if 'I can't move to the left or the right'. Another reported feeling as if 'I have lost parts of myself' and another felt 'unsure of what is expected of me'. They reported being ignored by their manager, feeling disappointed and guilty but not knowing 'what I did wrong'. One said that she should have tried harder to please the manager and repair the relationship. Some reported feeling incompetent in their work as if they had been stripped of their worth. Participants reported the persistence of the behaviours – it happened 'again and again' even after 'I have reported him to his manager'. 'He stayed so mad for a long time over something so small'. One participant reported that the manager made an appointment to talk about the incidents, but 'he was just trying to tell me that it was not as bad as I thought'.

Participants reported that their manager 'was cashing in on the poor relationship', as if he 'knew it was bad' and 'fragile', and that 'he could just keep going at me'. It was as if the participant's fragility 'was exploited further'. One participant referred specifically to the relationship 'spinning round and round' which is reminiscent of compulsivity.

Another participant showed signs of an inability to re-establish his individual identity and another showed acute signs of learned helplessness – as if 'I just can't get myself out of this thing'. It was suggested that this individual receive therapy.

Linking with White's (2004) suggestion about the bully's emotional position, participants shared how they started to see 'cracks' in the manager's behaviour which they framed as, 'I hope it is his guilt', 'I hope he feels ashamed' and 'no person can get (emotionally) away with this'.

The institutionalisation of bullying

The evidence suggested a similarity in all the represented organisations. Participants referred to how their management (the manager and his or her next higher level) 'drive performance hard'. Participants were often not sure of the criteria for success and succession, and there was either no performance management system or the existing one was non-effective and/or not trusted. Management was described as lacking 'care' and 'respect for people'. The climate was described as 'sometimes threatening' and 'strangely toxic' – colleagues preferred to work on their own or in very small groups. Trust in management was limited and people's experience of meaning was 'in doing it yourself'. Administrative support was limited, fluctuating and not dependable. Managers' criteria for reward and persecution were inconsistent, as if there was a new 'favourite person every month'. It seemed that management injected anxiety into the system which left the participants' colleagues de-authorised and with a sense of not being productive. All five of the diagnostic criteria for organisational bullying mentioned by Fox and Spector (2005) manifested themselves in the findings. These were the enactment of (1) intra and (2) interpersonal bullying behaviour, (3) victims experienced high levels of anxiety and emotional damage, (4) victims labelled themselves as bullied and acted as emotional containers and (5) experienced difficulty defending the self against the strong and unconscious attack.

Discussion

The purpose of the research was to describe organisational bullying experiences from the system psychodynamic perspective.

The research was important for its rich illustration of bullying as not only an individual psychological phenomenon about the bully and his or her one-way destructive behaviour, but rather a complex, systemic phenomenon involving the interpersonal relationship between bully and victim as well as the organisational culture and climate.

Theme 1 illustrated the bullies' neurotic and narcissistic defensive structures (Gaitanidis, 2007) played out in their relationships with the victims. Building on their individual neurotic need for recognition, the bullies used their valence to introject the system's performance anxiety and fear of failure, to avoid shame and persecutory anxiety (Lewis, 2004; White, 2001). Their narcissism and survival anxiety lead to them taking control of their relationships with the victims. This they did by splitting objects as all good or all bad. The unwanted and bad in the self was denied and projected onto another psychologically willing object in the belief that these belong to the other (Klein, 2005). According to Freud (1921) this process can be so effective that the bully lives as if these bad parts no longer exist. This was carried out to impress the authority in the bullies' mind (Hirschhorn, 1997), which becomes a projection of dependence onto their *good* colleagues and leaders in the system. The bullies experience

a sense of triumph from having exported the bad, and are left all good and the hero in the minds of their significant other. But, because in reality the bad remains part of the system's unconscious (Stapley, 1996; 2006), their defences are only temporarily effective – when the anxiety returned, the next outburst took place.

The bullies' script became a hysterical and egocentric modification of character to externalise the pain. The projections were performed in a powerful, hostile, domineering and alienating manner (Czander, 1993). Interpersonally, the victims were now dragged into the bullies' control drama as targets for the strong and aggressive projections, which resulted in their identification with the projection (Campbell, 2007; Klein, 2005). The bullies' effective *cleansing* of their own unwanted parts and placing these in the victims' psychic system as containers, changed their thinking, feeling and acting behaviour as if it belonged to their victims (Stapley, 2006).

Theme 2 illustrated the complex and unconsciously interconnected dyad between bully and victim in line with White's (2001; 2004) cycle theory of bullying.

In stage 1 the system prepared itself for an eruption. The bullies were stroking (James, 1977) their victims with positive feedback, and hooking them into a comfortable and loyal position (Campbell & Groenbaek, 2006) based on their need for recognition. The bullies' suppressed need for recognition was orchestrating the build-up towards the triggering event.

In Stage 2 the bullies turned a usual, conscious and rational transaction into an unconsciously planned argument, and anxiety provoking testing ground for the victims' readiness to become their strong (maybe resilient) container for their anxiety. The bullies' suppressed feelings of anger erupted into envious attacks (Kets de Vries, 2006). They now effectively split and projected their undesirable experiences, their inner sense of being out of control and their incompetence to deal with these things, onto their victims. The unconsciously selected victims with their own dynamics for serving others, were offered a way of satisfying their need for recognition. It was as if the proposition was attractive on some level, albeit it was powerful, hostile and humiliating. These victims identified with the projections and now carried the bullies' badness and they also carried the characteristics of the triggering moment, namely the bullies' lack of control, incompetence, isolation, confusion and amazement (Armstrong, 2005; Huffington, *et al.*, 2004).

In stage 3 the bullies were in control of the bully–victim dyad. They had emotionally entered the victims' emotional boundary (Lawrence, 1999), isolated them from their own experiences and their support from others. In this complex knot (White, 2004) the victims became the bullies' loyal psychic container – almost property. The victims' behaviour was interpreted as their irrational seeking for recognition and love from authority figures (possibly as a compensation

for not experiencing love and establishing firm boundaries during childhood) (Oade, 2009; Strandmark & Hallberg, 2007). Some victims continued to please the bully, as if their desired acceptance for authority overshadowed the harsh reality of being abused. This strong unconscious need to stay loyal in spite of pain was interpreted as their counter transference onto a significant person in authority who abused them (Klein, 2005).

Also, the victims introjected the seemingly good object by idealising the bullies. The victims' obsession with boundaries (Lawrence, 1999) was interpreted as their seeking for protection which resembled a post-traumatic experience (Kets de Vries, 2007; White, 2004). Their denial of the reality and their *defence on a defence* was interpreted as their idealisation of the bullies as objects of authority, and as an effort to introject the fantasised good object (Glasø, Matthiesen, Nielsen & Einarsen, 2007). The victim's experiences of their colleagues were filled with bewilderment and amazement. It was hypothesised that their colleagues used their own defences to avoid involvement in dealing with the bullying, which indicated that they were already involved, albeit through defences such as denial and suppression (Oade, 2007).

In stage 4 the boundaries between bullies and victims were obliterated (Lawrence, 1999) – psychically intertwined to the extent of confused identities, and trapped in a frenetic and parasitic dance (White, 2004). The bullies, as the aggressors in the strange dyad, seemed to have experienced themselves as innocent and projected their guilt effectively into the victims. The victims illustrated how the second order projective identification (White, 2004) lead to their blaming themselves for the bullying, based on feelings of worthlessness. They were effectively isolated and felt incompetent by accepting the bullies' description of them (Campbell, 2007). They seemed to have given their sense of self over to the bully.

One victim appeared quite vulnerable and damaged with no sense of support from any colleague or family. The suggestion of resilience therapy for this individual seemed in order (Sheehan, 1999; Sheehan & Barker, 1999). It was hoped that the victims would learn to be more suspicious towards positive feedback by becoming more conscious of the hostile edge of stroking (James, 1977). Although the bullies appeared to be coping well in the eyes of the victims, the evidence in the stories suggested that they were experiencing persecutory anxiety through fear of being reported or caught out (Speziale-Bagliacca, 2004).

Theme 3 illustrated that bullying triggers could not be explained as a simple cause and effect relationship – it seemed to be characterised by multiple causality in the micro (individual), meso (collegial) and macro systems (Hutchinson, Vickers, Jackson & Wilkens, 2006; Oade, 2009). The evidence suggested that bullying was institutionalised in these organisations in the presence of a valence towards fostering emotional abuse (Archer, 1999; Bain, 1998; Koonin & Green, 2004; Lewis, 2006) and post traumatic stress disorder

(Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2004). Using Fox and Spector's (2005) five criteria, the data confirmed the manifestation of organisational bullying. The findings suggested a sixth criterion of such bullying, namely an exceptionally negative, toxic and demoralising climate infiltrating work structures and processes (Fox & Spector, 2005; Salin, 2003). This was characterised by:

- high levels of performance and prosecutor anxiety and fear of failure (Lipgar & Pines, 2003)
- breeding violence just below the surface, called paranoia-genesis (Gould, Stapley & Stein, 2001; 2004)
- this violence being projected by the manager onto colleagues whilst distancing the self from the same rules in an entitled manner (Campbell, 2007)
- the splitting of ideas (between good and bad) (Klein, 2005)
- power and people separated into friend–versus–enemy camps where individuals experience isolation and their bad parts situated within the other, who then becomes the enemy and the receiver of the unwanted projections (Duffy & Sperry, 2007)
- selected over-authorisation of some and de-authorisation of others
- a silo mentality (Diamond & Allcorn, 2009)
- a traumatised me-ness (Morgan-Jones, 2010)
- a denial of what is going on by the organisational system (Ferris, 2004)
- a lack of formal motivational, incentive or reward systems where work load is experienced as non-equal and performance standards are kept ambiguous (Hauge, Skogstad & Einarsen, 2007; Rayner, Hoel & Cooper, 2002).

This sixth criterion resembles the description of the paranoid-schizoid organisation (Diamond & Allcorn, 2009) (the avoidance of personal accountability), the perverse state of mind (Sievers, 2009) (primary narcissism with individual need satisfaction at the expense of others) and the opposite of the authentizotic organisation (Kets de Vries, 2006) (characterised by trust, reliance, connectivity, a sense of flow, wholeness, appreciation, recognition, effectiveness, competence, autonomy and creativity).

The research hypothesis was formulated for bullying as an organisational phenomenon, for the bully and for the victim:

- **Hypothesis 1:** Organisational bullying acts as a powerful organisational embryonic domain phenomenon, erupting out of the organisational fabric in the presence of persecutory anxiety in the climate, intergroup and interpersonal behaviour, that thus causes psychological damage to the system.
- **Hypothesis 2:** Bullies defend against their personal anxieties concerning recognition by splitting good and bad, introjecting the good and sadistically projecting the bad onto and into another object with a specific valence, in the fantasy (which becomes the reality) that they will contain, hold and transform the content on behalf of the system.
- **Hypothesis 3:** Victims of bullying act from their valence for recognition seeking, masochistically offering themselves

to identify with the projections of bullies around badness, and contain these on behalf of the organisational system.

It was concluded that below the surface, bullying consists of the very specific, complex and dynamic interpersonal and organisational dynamics of splitting and projective identification, thus containing the organisational pain in different objects where it does not belong.

It was recommended that organisational psychologists, consultants, coaches and counsellors should take notice of bullying as an organisational and dynamic domain phenomenon on the macro level, manifesting in specific roles taken up in an unconsciously structured drama.

The limitations were formulated with reference to the method and the findings. The method of data gathering allowed participants to structure the interview which could have excluded specific important data. The method also included the notion of the defended subject. Although the researcher tried to remain aware of the mutual unconscious influences between the self and participant, it will remain unclear how this aspect influenced the data (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009).

It was suggested that future research focuses on the refinement of the hypothesis especially about the organisation's valence for breeding bullying as a systemic defence. Also, that identified bullies are used as defended subjects, possibly each with an identified victim.

Acknowledgements
Competing interests

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