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Dignity and respect: important in volunteer settings too!

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Abstract

Purpose – Volunteers in some organisations are subject to new protections under legislative amendments in Australia which proscribe workplace bullying. These new protections provide impetus for the question of whether workplace bullying is an issue for (unpaid) volunteers and (paid or unpaid) volunteer managers. The purpose of this paper is to outline key exploratory findings.

Design/methodology/approach – This exploratory and descriptive qualitative study employed an online survey to collect data on the experiences of participants and on their perception of what constitutes bullying in volunteering.

Findings – The evidence suggests that many of the negative behaviours which might be found in workplaces are also found in volunteering, but there are also aspects unique to this setting.

Research limitations/implications – This study was exploratory in nature and will benefit from further expansion and empirical testing.

Practical implications – Many respondents reported that they have been subject to, or witnessed events which they considered to be bullying. Recognition of the possibility of bullying in volunteering is a step towards amelioration.

Social implications – Volunteering has benefits for individuals and organisations, as well as contributing to social capital. Organisations which are cognisant of, and actively build positive cultures are better able to attract and retain talented and committed volunteers and managers.

Originality/value – There is an absence of research relating to workplace bullying in volunteer settings. As context plays a significant role in workplace bullying scenarios, this study opens up a unique perspective to this negative behaviour in a new setting.

Keywords Organizational culture, Inclusion, Volunteers, Workplace bullying, Nonprofit organizations, Volunteer settings

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Bullying is a complex phenomenon which has come under increased scrutiny in recent times, having once been viewed as school playground behaviour. Now recognised as an unwelcome feature of work, research on workplace bullying has burgeoned (e.g. Bishop and Hoel, 2008; Bjorkelo, 2013; Samnani, 2013a). There is evidence in the literature of the role of context in in understanding bullying (e.g. Hodson *et al.*, 2006; Sperry, 2009), and also in the individual's interpretation of behaviour as appropriate or inappropriate (e.g. Cowan, 2012). One sphere where limited attention has been paid to bullying is in the area of volunteering. A scan of the literature unearthed just one researcher who focused directly on the voluntary sector. Dawood (2010, 2013) reports findings on

workplace bullying in this sector in Leicester (UK), however, these studies do not focus on volunteers *per se*.

This paper outlines an exploratory and descriptive study carried out in western Australia to open investigations into the question "Is workplace bullying an issue for volunteers and volunteer managers?", and to determine whether further investigation of this question was warranted. The unique, and previously unexplored, volunteering environment offered the opportunity for new perspectives on perceptions and experiences of bullying, particularly as this context is often seen as embodying altruism.

Workplace bullying

Definitions of workplace bullying are many and varied (Chan-Mok *et al.*, 2014; Cowan, 2012; Lutgen-Sandvik and Tracy, 2012). Australian legislation relating to bullying in organisations includes definitions with three main characteristics: repeated occurrences; unreasonableness; and risk to health and safety (Chan-Mok *et al.*, 2014). The behaviour and associated experiences are, however, highly subjective, values based and context dependent. There is considerable debate as to what constitutes bullying in the Australian context. For example, there have been recent concerns relating to the need for repetition before action can be taken to redress bullying under occupational health and safety laws (Chan-Mok *et al.*, 2014). Hutchinson (2012) has called for workplace bullying to be more broadly reconceptualised as a multidisciplinary work and employment relations issue.

While workplace bullying research in Australia has been growing steadily, it was not until recently that it became the focus of legislative change. In one state in Australia, what is known as Brodie's Law was introduced in 2011 following the suicide of a young woman who had been subjected to repeated unwelcome abuse in her job in a café in Melbourne. Brodie's Law posited bullying in the criminal law jurisdiction and included potential penalties (House of Representative Standing Committee on Education and Employment, 2012, pp. 49-51).

Amendments to the Fair Work Act in Australia legislate against workplace bullying, but are not confined to employees, despite falling under a heading "workers bullied at work". The amendments also cover workers as defined under the national health and safety laws, including volunteers. This inclusion, while it does not cover all volunteers, means that some Australian volunteers have recourse to legal remedies with respect to bullying, and provides impetus for the question of whether workplace bullying is an issue for (unpaid) volunteers and (paid or unpaid) volunteer managers.

Volunteering

In a recent review, Wilson (2012, p. 176) observed that:

> In the last quarter of a century the study of volunteer work has assumed its rightful place at the core of the social sciences, no longer relegated to the status of a peripheral and inconsequential leisure pursuit or dismissed as an oddity in a world largely given over to the pursuit of self-interest.

Volunteering has been defined as "freely chosen and deliberate helping activities that extend over time, are engaged in without expectation of reward or other compensation and often through formal organizations, and that are performed on behalf of causes or individuals who desire assistance" (Snyder and Omoto, 2008, p. 3). This definition builds on the work of Cnaan *et al.* (1996) and contains the elements usually found in

definitions in use in Australia: free-will, formal organisation, without payment and in the service of others or the community.

Volunteer management, and managers, in the context of formal organisations, are the paid and unpaid staff/volunteers with responsibility for the organisation and co-ordination of volunteers and their activities. A central tenet of quality volunteer management is volunteer satisfaction and retention, given their value to organisations and the economy. Volunteers may be found in the nonprofit, government and private sectors, and across all of industries from education and health, to environment and sport. The importance of volunteering to the Australian economy has been estimated to be worth more than the key income generating activity of mining (O'Dwyer, 2013), but is also well recognised to be impossible to value, given that much of its benefit is incalculable and intangible.

Volunteering may be seen to be altruistic and pure activity unsullied by negative behaviours. Murray (2008, p. 245) refers to "nonformal, and usually unspoken, attitudes, beliefs, values and perceptions about the contribution of volunteers and how they should behave and be treated". Despite this, there has over the years, been research investigating paid staff volunteer conflict (e.g. Kreutzer and Jäger, 2011; Netting *et al.*, 2004) with some specific aspects of negative behaviours in volunteering being the focus of attention (e.g. abuse of umpires and officials in sport – Cuskelly and Hoye, 2013). Bullying in volunteering, however, has received scant research attention. There have been some studies in nonprofit organisations which have examined bullying behaviours amongst, for example, nursing staff (Hepburn and Enns, 2013; Hutchinson, 2013); however, these have tended to be about the paid staff in the organisation.

Recent work in Australia on complaints by and against volunteers (Volunteer Rights and Advocacy Working Group (VRAWG), 2013) has identified bullying as an issue needing further investigation. The negative behaviour has been the subject of 40 per cent of complaints against organisations with related issues such as "bad management", personality clashes, and paid staff/volunteer conflict making up a further 29 per cent. A recent study conducted in Leicester, UK (Dawood, 2013) found that around 25 per cent of respondents to the mixed methods study had encountered or been subject to bullying in the preceding year. This study also found that the percentage of victims was higher amongst paid employees, than volunteers, and that the types of behaviours ranged from overt work-related negative behaviours such as being exposed to unmanageable workload, to being shouted at and being the subject of rumour and gossip. The Leicester study also found that overt bullying behaviours were mostly perpetrated by outsiders, whereas covert behaviours tended to be the province of organisational insiders – superiors and co-workers. Earlier findings (Dawood, 2010) from interviews with 22 individuals, three of whom were volunteers, found that negative experiences were comparable with bullying experiences reported in other sectors. As introductory research on bullying in volunteering, the work of Dawood represents an important reference point for our study.

Our approach

Our study was designed as an exploratory and descriptive investigation into bullying in volunteering; a first step in issue identification with the aim of assessing the value of investment in further work. Once ethics approval was obtained, the authors introduced the study and sought study participants at a volunteering symposium; an annual event hosted by the state's peak volunteering body, and usually attended by around 100

individuals who work and volunteer in the field. The session was followed up with an e-mail invitation to complete an online survey, containing closed and open-ended questions on demographics, perceptions and bullying behaviours, including: nature, duration and impact. Respondents were able to invite others to complete the survey as well; a snowball technique.

The instrument, like the presentation, did not seek to offer a restrictive definition of bullying, instead asking respondents if they felt that they had been subject to, or witnessed bullying in volunteering, and sought their stories of what they considered to be such acts. This approach is in keeping with the notion that bullying is a subjective phenomenon (Samnani, 2013b), and that in exploring it in a new setting, new understandings might emerge which will inform further research.

Data analysis was methodical and systematic; the stories provided by the respondents were collated and a review undertaken independently by each researcher to identify common themes and trends. Due to the subjective nature of the phenomenon under investigation, a modified form of thematic analysis was undertaken, with researchers moving iteratively between identification of themes, analysis and review. The researchers then compared emerging themes, and these were cross-checked against the original data for verification, to ensure they were grounded in participants' experiences. As an exploratory study, the focus was on identification of themes which would allow for discussion of the research question, and give voice to the participants' experiences (Ezzy, 2002; Silverman, 2014).

Respondent profile
Respondents ranged from volunteers in all-volunteer organisations to volunteers and paid managers in large well-known nonprofit organisations. Of the 136 people who elected to complete the survey 64.6 per cent indicated that they were active volunteers, and 64.8 per cent indicated that they manage volunteers. At first glance this may seem to be a contradiction, but as volunteers often take on more than one role, paid managers of volunteers often undertake voluntary work in other organisations, and not all managers of volunteers are paid, this is not an unexpected overlap.

Of the respondents, 80 per cent were female, with the majority (40 per cent) in the 45-64 age group. English was the first language of 92 per cent of the respondents, while 85 per cent indicated Australian as their nationality. The data indicated a limited level of diversity in the sample. This was not unexpected as "volunteering" is a somewhat culture bound concept (Fairley *et al.*, 2013; Petriwskyj and Warburton, 2007). Respondents named countries in Africa, Asia, Europe and the USA, as well as Australia, as their birthplaces. All respondents (100 per cent) indicated that they had previous work experience. In terms of organisations and volunteer activity, over half of the respondents indicated that their organisation fell into the category of health and community services (55 per cent). Other industry types were represented including emergency services, sporting organisations, arts and heritage, with religious bodies being the least represented.

Findings
This exploration suggests that bullying in volunteering shares similar elements with that of other settings, but also that there may be some aspects unique to this environment. Approximately one-third of respondents indicated that they had been subjected to bullying behaviours. It is important to highlight, however, that two-thirds

of respondents had not experienced bullying in volunteering. A number of respondents provided emphatic messages, for example: "I have not experienced bullying in my lifetime of volunteering". However, there were others who reported: "I have not experienced bullying, but have seen other people experiencing bullying". This discussion focuses on those who reported having experienced or witnessed bullying in the volunteer setting.

Respondents were asked to detail their most significant experience of bullying in a volunteer setting. The aim here was to get a picture of the interpretation of the bullying phenomenon in their unique setting. This approach was adopted rather than giving a standard definition at the outset, and yielded some patterns which deserve attention with respect to the more recently adopted official definitions. At the conclusion of the survey, respondents were asked to define bullying in their own words. Systematic consideration of these descriptions leads to a conclusion that while individual interpretations prevail, people often consider behaviours to be a type of bullying where they feel that the individual has, in the words of one respondent, stepped outside commonly established boundaries. Only four of the descriptions made a point of including the notion of repetition by using the words ongoing, repeatedly, regular basis, and consistently and there was only one direct reference to safety, although some descriptions referred to risk and many referred to anxiety and stress. There were specific elements in the descriptions offered which related to the volunteer context. These are discussed with respect to the types of events identified by respondents below.

The question of "who is bullying who?" also provides a backdrop to the evidence which follows on from the nature of the bullying incidents described. Respondents were asked to both describe a significant bullying event, and to identify the perpetrator/s by their role in the organisation. The types of bullying events described included: volunteer on volunteer; volunteer on manager of volunteers; management committee on volunteers; Chief Executive Officer on volunteer/s; committee members on committee members; senior management on volunteers; clients on volunteers; paid staff on volunteers; volunteers on paid staff; groups of volunteers on individual volunteers; paid staff on groups of volunteers; and paid staff on paid staff. There were also references to parents of club members, committee executive, and members of the public and clients as perpetrators. Totally, 20 different identifiers were ascribed to the "perpetrators".

There was no overwhelming pattern of "who" in this sample. Here, the question of "who" is closely related to aspects of "what". This understanding was considered in relation to responses to a question asking participants to describe the most severe or significant case of bullying (in volunteering) that they had experienced or witnessed. A number of patterns were identified in the data which illustrate that there are certain aspects of volunteering and volunteer management which provide potential for somewhat unique forms of bullying. The more general types of bullying behaviours are discussed, after which the more distinctive types of behaviours are described, and then the factors which contribute to these unique forms of bullying are considered.

Bullying behaviours
The nature and types of many of the bullying behaviours which were described by participants are familiar to scholars of bullying as being typical in many settings. These included: intimidation – "A colleague behaved in a passively aggressive manner which intimidated me and upset many others"; actions which made the target feel like they could not contribute ideas – "being bullied out of an idea or suggestion made to help improve the group"; and, the way that frontline staff are subject to abuse from

clients and the public – "One client who belittled and bullied me; as well as, public humiliation – screamed 'SHUT UP' [capitals in original] at me in public […]. he then screamed at me (again in public) 'don't just f———g stand there! Do something'"; and gossiping and exclusion – "exclusion, shouted at, talking sharply at, talking behind my back".

All of these examples, and many others such as explicit put downs relating to physical appearance, and being ignored at work are not confined to volunteer settings, nor is what one volunteer referred to as fattist behaviour, and yelling, screamed at over the telephone, and belittling me and making me fear for my job. One respondent talked about being "unfortunate to have won a position in a small […] organisation".

There were, however, a number of forms of behaviours described by respondents which have elements unique to volunteer settings, even if only because of the volunteers. These fall into a number of categories, some of which overlap, and many of which have been the subject of scrutiny with respect to research into volunteering, but without the label "bullying". These are discussed with reference to exemplar quotes from respondents and the literature.

One unique aspect which came up quite frequently in the stories provided was bullying of a volunteer co-ordinator or manager by volunteers. Somewhat similar to upward bullying, managers subject to this form of bullying may feel unable to act due to the voluntary status of the perpetrators. This took a number of forms including service volunteers bullying the paid staff member with responsibility for the programme or activity: "An aggressive volunteer not willing to adhere to the volunteering guidelines put in place to protect clients and volunteers", and, "Several of the experienced volunteers demanding that I fire a couple of the new volunteers because they did not like them".

This notion of newness extended to situations where the manager was new to the organisation or the role:

> A volunteer for many years took a dislike on [sic] the new co-ordinator of the volunteering service and was very verbal about this fact to such an extent that the co-ordinator's job was made extremely difficult.

Bullying of the "new" person was reported between paid staff:

> Within weeks I was restricted in the role that I had accepted and no amount of team building, one on one meetings or team meetings could work it out […].

and between volunteer peers:

> Palliative care volunteers who have been at the hospital the longest seem to think they have the right to vet new volunteers and to boss them around and give them menial tasks […].

There were numerous reports of the paid staff member being bullied by "management" both paid and unpaid:

> Being continually harassed and abused by a member of a higher echelon of the association on many occasions. This was observed by other members and only on one occasion was anything said or done.

The evidence of paid staff being "bullied" into "volunteering" beyond the hours of their paid work came up on numerous occasions, with the expectation that this was part of the role: "Expectations to 'volunteer' time as an employee of an organisation".

The evidence of volunteer managers being perceived as bullying volunteers included:

Being forced to sign a code of conduct used by state government employees. Several of us objected to the terms and wording as they were neither applicable or suitable for volunteers. We were told if we didn't sign we would have to quit our volunteer jobs.

And:

4 hours volunteering, being given 5 minutes tea break while the manageress sat at the back and chatted. I was alone at the front serving the customers and the lot. No appreciation or gratification.

There were also numerous reports of other paid staff bullying volunteers, including expecting them to undertake duties not within volunteer roles:

Feeling pressured to do paid employees' work in a hospital setting including changing soiled bedding.

and blaming:

[MANAGER} DID NOT TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEIR ACTIONS AND BLAMED OTHERS [caps in original].

Quite a number of the behaviours which were described as bullying occurred in committee settings:

Subversive, over-bearing and belligerent behaviour of a fellow committee member who constantly ridiculing [sic] me behind my back and made untrue and unjustified statements accusing me of poor communication, inability to delegate and dictatorial behaviour. The antagonist in question was frequently rude and over-bearing, refusing to abide by majority decisions.

or in all-volunteer settings:

My experience of bullying was not the fighting kind but the position kind. In a volunteer group pushing to be better, to be close to the head person to show you are something. I have seen a lot of people leaving because they were pushed aside, bullied out of the work they liked.

A number of the bullying experiences reported were about perspectives on performance management with the role of the volunteer board being part of the situation:

A volunteer chairman who is autocratic and who both overtly and surrepticiously [sic] bullies and manipulates staff and volunteers to achieve his own way and who also autocratically and covertly advises members whether or not they can stand for election or re-election to the committee if they don't agree with his views or if they question his autocratic, unrealistic demands and decision making habits or if they request written confirmation of his verbal communication.

There were also a number of instances where power and control issues might be associated with the often tight budgets which are ever present in many nonprofit organisations:

The controlling unhappy person who makes a workplace theirs through dint of telling people how hard they work for how little money – then making sure that no one comes along to change their perfect system. This behaviour tends to be created by long term staff members who are underpaid for the task that they do.

The relationships between paid and volunteer staff, and paid and volunteer management were often discussed by respondents in relation to status and power. One respondent observed "we felt we were being treated as paid staff, when in essence volunteers are far more valuable as we choose to give our time". Such a statement illustrates a view that may not be shared by those who believe that unpaid staff are only volunteers, or that all staff both paid and unpaid deserve to be treated with respect. Volunteers are sometimes seen as being free to leave an organisation where they are uncomfortable, but research has shown that volunteers are committed not only to the organisation, but to the cause and to the people, and will therefore choose to stay and put up with bad behaviour. Further, volunteer involving organisations seek to retain highly committed and high-performing volunteers in order to deliver their services to the community (Paull and Omari, 2014).

Unique: is bullying in volunteering different to other settings?

There are many aspects of the relationship between volunteers and their organisations which have been the subject of research. This includes the notion of the psychological contract being in place for volunteers in a similar way to paid staff (Nichols, 2012; Vantilborgh *et al.*, 2012). The evidence from this study is that the behaviours of individuals towards each other at times can be interpreted as forms of bullying by targets and witnesses. The issues which lead to conflict are often those which can be found in other settings, such as power and status, poor interpersonal skills, territory and miscommunication. Inappropriate behaviour and incivility found in volunteering are similar to those found in employment. Previous research on staff/volunteer conflict (e.g. Field-Richards and Arthur, 2012) has already highlighted some of the issues which respondents noted as bullying. Examples include: the role of the volunteer manager and the roles and responsibilities of volunteers (e.g. Vinton, 2012); matters such as demanding illegitimate tasks of volunteers (e.g. van Schie *et al.*, 2013); and issues such as founders' syndrome (e.g. English and Peters, 2011).

The results in this study offer some consistency with the work of Dawood (2013) who observed that 63 per cent of the victims were subjected to office politics. Dawood (2010) also found that management committee members can be part of the problem, rather than taking responsibility for the development of a respectful workplace culture. This is consistent with reported power and status bullying. Dawood (2013) attributes the tight financial circumstances in many voluntary organisations as a contributor to the behaviours, especially amongst paid staff.

An Australian survey (VRAWG, 2013) investigated 113 complaints by volunteers against organisations. Approximately one-third of these complaints related to allegations labelled by respondents as "bullying", but the remainder, including paid staff/volunteer relationships, exclusion and personality clashes, are similar to those acts labelled by our respondents as bullying. This speaks to a need to either broaden the conceptualisation of bullying itself, or, our preferred option, to better promote the need for organisational cultures, policies and codes which encourage high standards of behaviour, and which offer remedies for incivility and inappropriate behaviours. We advocate the promulgation of codes of conduct which acknowledge and respect volunteers, whilst at the same time reining in inappropriate behaviours by volunteers themselves. These codes should be inclusive, and offer remedies for all individuals in volunteering, paid and unpaid, frontline and management, as well clients and beneficiaries, and management committees.

Dawood (2013, p. 67) inferred that "voluntary organisations are perhaps failing to recognise the seriousness of the problem and, in view of their commitment towards social justice, this failure is in direct conflict with the aims and principles of the voluntary sector". Our study confirms the work of Dawood (2010, 2013) in highlighting that volunteer involving organisations may need to acknowledge that bullying is a potential problem.

Significant attention is paid, both in the research and in practice, to the elements of volunteering which make people give willingly of their time, and why they stay volunteering despite the lack of financial reward; a good volunteer experience is more likely to entice a volunteer to stay (e.g. Waikayi *et al.*, 2012). Engagement, fulfilment of the psychological contract and appreciation of their efforts have all been found to tie people to the organisation (Berthelsen *et al.*, 2011). Forster (1997) identified that people stay due to their commitment to the cause, to the task or to the people. Should individuals stay, in a voluntary capacity or paid role, without affective commitment their contribution to the organisation is likely to be lower (Valéau *et al.*, 2013).

This exploration illustrates that while there are those who have never experienced or witnessed bullying in volunteering, there are also those whose experience is different. The evidence is that much of the inappropriate behaviour which might be found in workplaces may also found in volunteer settings, but there are also behaviours which might be considered unique to volunteering. An environment where interpersonal behaviours are inclusive, civil, and respectful, will contribute to the development of affective commitment, and to a deepening of the psychological contract. It is clear from this exploratory study that bullying is a personal, institutional and subjective phenomenon which warrants further investigation to better ascertain its prevalence and forms.

Future directions

The interpretation of particular acts or events as bullying is associated with a number of factors, including what is acceptable or not in a particular context. Clear statements as to what is not acceptable provide individuals with guidance, and allow others, including managers, witnesses and bystanders, to intervene should they feel uncomfortable about certain types of behaviours. Some areas of volunteering, including sport, have developed codes of conduct to enable management of unacceptable behaviours. It is also apparent that it is not clear what sorts of behaviours might be labelled as "bullying", and there are varied interpretations of the types of negative behaviours which might be considered as such. By adopting an approach which offered individuals the opportunity to identify unacceptable and inappropriate behaviours as bullying, this exploration has opened up a range of experiences of volunteers and volunteer managers, and identified some avenues for further investigation. Amongst these are issues associated with the manner and style of management of paid and volunteer workers, relationships between management committees and managers of volunteers.

It is necessary to delve more deeply into a number of aspects of the findings of this research. First and foremost a broader study, with a more diverse sample, will enable better understanding of the prevalence and nature of inappropriate behaviours in volunteer settings, and the gathering of more data will facilitate better understanding of these. The contextual contributions of factors such as the presence or otherwise of a code of conduct or anti-bullying policy, codified and rights and responsibilities of volunteers, and the overall organisational climate, will need to be further explored, perhaps building on the work of Dawood (2010, 2013) in this area. In the interim,

however, at the practical level it might be more useful for volunteer involving organisations to look at promoting codes of conduct, rather than establishing separate anti-bullying policies. While there are aspects of the volunteer setting which may be unique, the idea that bullying does not occur in volunteering might be considered naïve, and the evidence is that much of the inappropriate behaviour which is found in workplaces may also found in volunteer settings. Given the evidence in this exploration, and others, that there are multiple interpretations of what constitutes bullying, and that the legal position requires that a threat to health and safety is needed before the Fair Work Act (in Australia) comes into effect, it is likely that even a single event or act could lead to a complaint, and to complicated situations for both volunteer and manager. In addition, the amelioration of bullying is not just about addressing a single event or series of events, but about creating a culture of dignity and respect, for all, including volunteers.

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