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Renee L. Cowan <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Communication , University of Texas , San Antonio

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# “\*it Rolls Downhill” and Other Attributions for Why Adult Bullying Happens in Organizations From the Human Resource Professional’s Perspective

Renee L. Cowan

*Although communication researchers have begun to investigate bullying from the human resource (HR) professional’s perspective, attention has not focused on the attributions HR professionals make concerning why bullying happens in contemporary organizations. Understanding what HR professionals believe causes bullying is important because these attributions are likely guiding HR professionals’ interpretations of the situation and the actors involved, as well as their communications and actions in bullying situations. Using in-depth interviewing and grounded theory data analysis techniques, this article uncovered 5 causes of bullying from the HR perspective: aggressive management styles, deficient communication skills, the organizational culture, contemporary issues, and personality clashes. These findings are discussed along with implications, limitations, and future research.*

*Keywords: Attribution Theory; Bullying; Human Resource Professionals; Organization*

Workplace bullying has been defined from the human resource (HR) perspective as “Actions and practices that a ‘reasonable person’ would find abusive, occur repeatedly or persistently, are intended to harm the target, and result in economic, psychological, or physical harm to the target and/or create a hostile work environment”

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Renee L. Cowan (PhD, Texas A&M University, 2009) is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication, University of Texas at San Antonio, One UTSA Blvd., San Antonio, TX 78249. E-mail: renee.cowan@utsa.edu

(Fox, Cowan, & Lykkeback, 2012, p. 10). Bullying is a distinctly communicative phenomenon as it is enacted and perpetuated through verbal and nonverbal communication (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003; Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy, & Alberts, 2007). In recent years, academic researchers have begun to focus on HR professionals as integral actors in bullying situations. From the HR perspective, we now know they define and understand bullying very similarly to targets (Cowan, 2012), do the best with the resources they have to thwart and address bullying (Cowan, 2009, 2012), and believe U.S. organizations have anti-bullying policies even if these policies do not use the term *bullying* (Cowan, 2011). They also believe anti-bullying policies are positive and address bullying (Cowan, 2011) and report being targets of bullying at the same rate as the general population (Daniels, 2011). Although we have begun to investigate bullying from the HR perspective, research has not focused on the attributions HR professionals make concerning why bullying happens in contemporary organizations. How HR professionals talk about workplace bullying creates the reality to which they subsequently respond—that is, attributions guide action.

### Attributions for Bullying

Attribution theory concerns the perception of causation and resulting actions. Kelley and Michela (1980) wrote, “The common ideas are that people interpret behavior in terms of its causes and that these interpretations play an important role in determining reactions to the behavior” (p. 458). In other words, what a person believes caused a particular behavior will affect their interpretation of and subsequent reaction to the behavior. Theorists also point to two important factors that affect attributions important to this research: externality or internality (causes due to environmental conditions or causes due to the person) and perceived controllability (i.e., whether the person is able to control the cause; Weiner, 1985). Targets attribute bullying to a variety of internal and external sources including the HR professional and their perceived lack of action in bullying situations (Davenport, Schwartz, & Elliott, 2002; Glendinning, 2001; Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011; Namie & Namie, 2003; Yamada, 2006). This belief has resulted in targets reporting that they stop seeking help from HR in many bullying situations, as the problem seems to escalate or get worse with HR involvement (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003; Namie, 2012).

To date, we do not know what attributions HR professionals make concerning why bullying happens in organizations. Understanding what HR professionals believe causes bullying is important because these attributions will likely guide HR professionals’ interpretation of the situation and the actors involved, as well as their communication and actions in bullying situations. There is no doubt these actions are resulting in real consequences for the organization and targets (Weiner, 1985). With this in mind, I posed the following research question:

*RQ1: What attributions do HR professionals make concerning why bullying happens in organizations?*

## Method

This research is a continuation of the author's work on bullying and the HR professional's perspective (see Cowan, 2011, 2012). I used a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques to recruit participants for this study (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000) from a large human resource management (HRM) association. Thirty-six participants were recruited. The majority of the participants ( $n = 19$ ) were considered midlevel HR managers in small to medium-sized organizations. Twenty-three of the 36 HR professionals were women and 13 were men. Close to one-half ( $n = 17$ ) of the participants reported that they had special HR certifications (PHR, SPHR); the majority ( $n = 28$ ) reported that they were members of some regional or national HRM association. This sample size is consistent with samples in other qualitative research projects (Cowan & Hoffman, 2007; Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, & Alberts, 2006). All of the participants were assured confidentiality and asked to sign consent forms. All research procedures were approved by the appropriate institutional review board.

### *Data Collection*

I conducted one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with each research participant. The majority of the interviews were conducted face to face ( $n = 26$ ), and 10 interviews were conducted via telephone due to distance. The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 min, with the majority taking about 60 min. I asked the HR professionals to detail their stories regarding their experiences relating to workplace bullying (Lindloff & Taylor, 2002) and then asked a series of open-ended questions to gain an even deeper understanding of how the participants have understood bullying and its causes, HR roles in bullying situations, and organizational policy associated with bullying. This article reflects only those ideas associated with the attributions HR professionals make concerning why bullying happens. (For research results on the aforementioned topics, see Cowan, 2011, 2012.) The interviews were transcribed verbatim, which resulted in 352 single-spaced pages of analyzable text.

### *Data Analysis*

Strauss and Corbin's (1990) grounded theory approach to data analysis was used to determine themes associated with the causes of bullying. In grounded theory, data analysis consists of a two-step data coding process (open and axial). During open coding data is broken down and emerging concepts are labeled. I began open coding by taking apart sentences and paragraphs and asking questions such as, "What is this?" or "What does this represent?," and then naming the phenomenon. This process generated 13 open codes related to *RQ1*. During axial coding, categories identified during open coding are further categorized through the identification of larger themes. Larger themes were identified by asking questions such as "How are these codes the same?" and "How are they different?" This process resulted in the original

13 open codes being subsumed into five prominent categories detailed below. I attempted to check the interpretation with seven of the participants who volunteered to serve as member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Four participants responded to this request and related that the interpretation of the data was accurate and reflected their views.

## Results

The HR professionals in this study voiced several different attributions concerning why bullying happened in organizations. These causes included an aggressive management style, deficient communication skills, the organizational culture, contemporary issues, and personality clashes. Some HR professionals even felt that bullying could be due to a variety of these issues.

### *Aggressive Management Style*

The HR professionals believed that some bullying was caused by an aggressive management style (an internal cause that is uncontrollable and unintentional). The HR professionals seemed to be referring to what Blake and Mouton (1964) talked about as an “authority-compliance” style of management. The concerns of a manager with this style are productivity and tasks, rather than people. Some have described these managers as “controlling, demanding, hard driving, and overpowering” (Northouse, 2007, p. 73). Phyllis commented, “There are certain communication styles that will see other people as a bully when it’s not their intent. Their intent is to get their work done as quickly and as efficiently as possible.” These participants pointed to some bullying situations as differences in perceptions of appropriate management styles. In addition, this clash of styles was also attributed to the presence of many differing generations in one workplace. Most mentioned that the more directive, aggressive style of management was a product of some managers’ generation (“baby boomers”) and that some employees misinterpret this style because they are “Generation X and Y” (i.e., the millennial generation who is more sensitive, more community-oriented, and has a stronger sense of entitlement). This kind of attribution is both internal and uncontrollable; some HR professionals reacted by suggesting that soft skills training was needed.

### *Deficient Communication Skills*

Some HR professionals attributed bullying to deficient communication skills. This reason was seen as internal and uncontrollable as bullying behaviors were often attributed to a lack of skills or training on the part of the bully (thus placing the control associated with skill development on the organization, not on the individual bully). More specifically, the HR professionals pointed to a lack of emotional intelligence for dealing with bullying issues in a constructive way. Emotional intelligence refers to a “clear understanding of the emotional needs of a situation and the

self-awareness and self-control necessary for using the right emotional display to cope with the situation” (Miller, 2009, p. 204). Jaime commented, “You can do research on emotional intelligence and you can see he or she [the bully] has a problem with emotional intelligence.” Vivian alluded to issues with emotional intelligence when she commented on how bullies “could be very highly educated but their internal personalities, their egos, and self esteem issues, you know—wanting to feel more powerful over someone else results in bullying behaviors.” Some of the HR professionals believed incorporating assessments of soft skills into selection processes and engaging in on the job training could be beneficial.

### *Organizational Culture*

The participants attributed some bullying to organizational culture and saw this cause as external and uncontrollable. These HR professionals believed the organizational culture influenced whether bullying behaviors were accepted or not. Some of the HR professionals talked about how “shit rolls downhill,” and if those at the top of the organization bullied, bullying was seen as the accepted way to act in the organization. Others talked about how bullying behaviors were not tolerated in their organizations and were “squashed” if started. These participants believed a bullying culture was created and perpetuated by those at the top. Jean commented, “Everything emanates from the top. So if the President or [Vice President’s] were to come out and take a strong stance on bullying, you would have more people address the situations.” Pat pointed to a multiplier effect when it comes to those at the top and bullying behaviors: “The higher up you go in organizations in terms of issues, the larger effect it has. If you have a [Chief Executive Officer] or C-level person who is somehow disrespectful it has such a multiplier effect.” Some of the HR professionals speculated that they would react to this issue by monitoring issues of culture and seek top management support for anti-bullying initiatives and policies.

### *Contemporary Issue*

A few HR professionals felt that bullying was really a product of contemporary society, or due to external uncontrollable events. They talked about the economic downturn (people worried about losing their jobs) as one contemporary issue. Donald commented, “I think I attribute a lot of bullying to what is happening in the world at large. People are coming to work with a lot of stress and they are taking it out on other people.” Another contemporary issue the HR professionals mentioned was the increase of diversity in the workplace as a bullying trigger. Teresa commented, “Part of reason for bullying is diversity. In diverse workplaces you have someone who is different, whether that is racially, sexual orientation, physical being, whatever it is, and someone is bullying because they can’t deal with diversity.” Similar to reactions related to organizational culture, HR reactions associated with this attribution could be a hyper-vigilance with regard to contemporary issues as

pointed to by some of these participants. Still others felt that bullying was really just human nature.

### *Personality Clashes*

Some HR professionals attributed bullying to internal uncontrollable personality clashes. Kat commented that these clashes are just part of human nature and would not go away:

When you have groups of people they are going to not always get along—when people don't get along what do they do, they make fun of one another, they go off in their little cliques and groups and that is just what happens and I don't think it matters if you are 5 or 55.

Tiffany similarly commented:

I mean when you have an office of 25 people you have the whole variety of personality types and you have some people who are naturally a little more timid and can be bullied and then you have the person who can start the intimidation.

HR professionals seemed to believe that bullying behaviors could result from a personality conflict and that these types of conflict would inevitably be found in workplaces. Possible reactions associated with this attribution could be increased personality screening in the hiring process or reassignment of the bully or target.

### **Discussion, Implication, and Conclusion**

This research demonstrates that HR professionals believe bullying can be caused by several different factors (an aggressive management style, deficient communication skills, organizational culture, and personality clashes). These findings point to several theoretical and practical implications.

First, as attribution theory posits, these attributions are likely to be guiding HR professionals' interpretation of bullying situations and the actors involved (Weiner, 1985). Taken together, HR professionals seem to attribute bullying to both internal factors (personality, management style, and communication skills) and external factors (culture and contemporary society), all of which were seen as uncontrollable or not under the volition of the actor (either the target or bully). This finding is important because if attributions guide interpretations, then it is likely that HR professionals believe the causes of bullying are not under the complete control of bullies or targets (Weiner, 1985). If HR professionals hold this belief, their reactions and actions in bullying situations are likely to be more even-handed than much target-focused research has postulated (Glendinning, 2001; Namie & Namie, 2003; Yamada, 2006). This finding is encouraging because it points to HR professionals as organizational actors who are likely to move past simple explanations of bullying to look for more root causes. Lutgen-Sandvik and Tracy (2012) called for researchers and practitioners to "move beyond examining abuse as a solely psychological, dyadic issue manifesting 'inside' organizations" (p. 8). These HR professionals point to areas that should inform this call, including focusing more attention on contemporary

issues that could spark bullying, such as global and national economic conditions and cultural shifts brought on by newer generational values. As Lutgen-Sandvik and Tracy suggested, exploring social and cultural factors should help researchers target macro-level sources that serve to perpetuate destructive behavior like bullying. On a practical note, this research suggests if organizations are serious about rooting out causes of bullying, they should invest in HR professionals in several ways, including equipping them with the power and knowledge needed to address aggressive managing styles and produce positive communication skills.

Second, these findings confirm theoretical research on the causes of bullying. Salin (2003) theorized several possible antecedents to bullying, including motivating structures such as elements of the organizational culture (low perceived costs of bullying and lack of intervention by power holders) and aggressive management style. These HR professionals confirmed these factors and also saw them as motivating bullying in organizations. On a practical note, HR professionals have suggested bullying cultures can only be addressed with a top-down approach (Cowan, 2009). Lutgen-Sandvik and Tracy (2012) suggested that bullying should be addressed from the macrolevel causes through to microlevel causes. This means that top management needs to be invested in recasting the dominant discourses that serve to validate and perpetuate bullying activities (i.e., the “shit rolls downhill” mentality and others), as well as validating anti-bullying organizational policy and initiating training efforts with would-be bullies.

Although this research uncovered important information regarding HR professionals and causes of bullying, any qualitative study is limited by the size and composition of the sample. In this case, the sample was composed almost entirely of HR professionals who are part of professional HRM associations. Future research should seek to uncover the perspective of a wider population of HR professionals, which could point to an even more in-depth understanding of how HR professionals understand and deal with bullying. Investigating HR attributions of specific bullying cases, as well as their reactions to these cases, could prove fruitful for this line of research. New knowledge concerning the HR perspective on bullying should lead to answers to addressing bullying in concrete ways in organizations.

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