

**PERCEPTIONS OF BULLYING AND ORGANISATIONAL ANTECEDENTS IN  
THE SOUTH AFRICAN WORKPLACE**

by

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## ABSTRACT

The majority of the extant literature on workplace bullying has focused on bullying as an interpersonal phenomenon rather than examine its structural contributors. Similarly, few studies have examined players in bullying and organisational antecedents at the same time. This study provides a three-way view and understanding of how and why bullying happens in organisations from the perspectives of targets, Human Resource (HR) professionals, and bystanders by examining organisational antecedents of bullying using Salin's (2003b) workplace bullying conceptual framework. Salin's (2003b) conceptual framework on workplace bullying provided a lens through which to examine and explain organisational contributors to bullying in the workplace. Data were collected through qualitative interviews with targets and HR professionals and focus group discussions with bystanders. Salin's (2003b) framework was used to structure the interview questions, the focus group agenda and for initial data analysis. The study's key findings point to the significance of incorporating societal context in understanding organisational factors which make bullying possible and more likely to occur. The study thus makes a significant contribution to a theoretical conceptual level by refining and expanding Salin's (2003b) framework and including societal context as a structural contributor to bullying in the workplace. On a methodological level, the use of qualitative methods makes a contribution to research conducted by South African scholars. Previous South African research on bullying was primarily conducted through surveys aimed at determining the extent of bullying prevalence in the workplace, whereas this study seeks to understand bullying from the participants' subjective experiences. Lastly, the study makes a contribution on the practical level by providing organisations, HR professionals and bystanders with insights and mechanisms they can use to heighten awareness around the prevalence of bullying in the workplace, as well as ways in which they can prevent and/or handle bullying incidents when they occur.

**Keywords:** bullying; harassment; antecedents; conceptual framework; societal context.

**DECLARATION**

I, Ngao Dorcas Lenyalo Motsei, declare that “Perceptions of Bullying and Organisational Antecedents in the South African Workplace” is my own unaided work and contains no material that has, to the best of my knowledge, been accepted for the award of any other degree in any other university or tertiary institution, as well as any material previously published, except where due reference has been made in the text of this thesis.

SIGNED \_\_\_\_\_ DATE \_\_\_\_\_

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## DEDICATION

The wind beneath my wings! To my late father Rantebo John Motsei, who passed on the 31<sup>st</sup> May 2014, when I was busy writing this thesis.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

Abbreviation	Meaning
AA	Affirmative Action
AET	Affective Events Theory
Atlas.ti	A computer-aided qualitative data analysis programme
B-BBEE	Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment
CAQDAS	Computer-aided Qualitative Data Analysis
CCMA	Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
COO	Chief Operations Officer
EAP	Employee Assistance Programme
EE	Employment Equity
EEA	Employment Equity Act of 1998
GDP	Graduate Development Programme
HR	Human Resource Professionals
ICN	International Council of Nurses
IPM	Institute of People Management
ILO	International Labour Organisation
LIPT	Leymann Inventory of Psychological Terror
LRA	Labour Relations Act, 66 of 1995
NAQ	Negative Acts Questionnaire
OB	Organisational Behaviour
OST	Organisational Support Theory
PA	Personal Assistant
POS	Perceived Organisational Support
PSI	Public Service International
SA	South Africa
SET	Social Exchange Theory
SIP	Social Information processing
SIT	Social Identity Theory
UK	United Kingdom



US	United States
WBI	Workplace Bullying Institute
WHO	World Health Organisation

# CHAPTER 1

## THE PROBLEM AND ITS SETTING

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

This study investigates how targets, HR professionals and bystanders perceive and define bullying. Its goal is to understand bullying at the level of the South African workplace, and not at the level of participating organisations. The study therefore investigates what targets, HR professionals and bystanders perceived to be organisational antecedents of bullying in the context of South Africa. This chapter provides the background to and motivation for the research and the problem statement. It also describes the purpose of the research, including objectives which guided the process, outlines the research scope and approach, and gives a summary of its theoretical and practice-level contributions. A rationale is given for the choice of theoretical framework, followed by ethical considerations and standards required for conducting a qualitative study. The summary is followed by a clarification explanation of key concepts and definition of terms used in the study. The chapter concluded by describing the structure of the thesis.

### 1.2 BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH MOTIVATION

Bullying was originally studied in children, and in South Africa it is to some extent still associated with children at school. However, over the years, bullying in the workplace, notably in Europe, North America and Australia has received much attention, particularly from researchers studying management and organisational studies (Crothers & Minutolo, 2009). Workplace bullying is a complex phenomenon which occurs in a number of different ways, some easy to recognise and identify, others more subtle and difficult to explain. The former type includes ridiculing or demeaning someone in front of others, or deliberately undermining a competent employee with

constant criticism. The latter include withholding information that can affect an employee's performance, setting unreasonable and impossible deadlines, and overbearing supervision.

Workplace bullying is often confused with other forms of negative acts at work, such as harassment, discrimination, and victimisation. As a result, most of the workplace bullying research in the last 20 to 30 years has focused on defining the negative behaviour of non-sexual and non-racial harassment in the workplace, such as spreading malicious rumours about employees, intentionally blocking promotion or training opportunities for competent staff, victimisation, screaming at, and humiliating individuals in front of others (Hoel, Glasø, Hetland, Cooper & Einarsen, 2010; Hoel & Cooper, 2000).

This gave rise to different arguments about what workplace bullying is and what it is not. The proliferation of definitions and arguments points to the infancy of research on workplace bullying as a scholarly activity. Heinz Leymann, a German psychiatrist who established the world's first work trauma clinic in Sweden in the 1980's, used the term 'mobbing' because his research found that a target can be bullied by two or more people.

Related workplace problems, such as mobbing, harassment, workplace victimisation and abuse first received attention in organisations in the Scandinavian and United Kingdom countries in the late 1980s and early 1990s, since then modern-day organisations in the Western world recognise bullying in the workplace as a serious and growing problem not to be ignored (see for example, Samnani, 2013a; 2013b, Salin, 2001, 2003, 2008, 2009, van Heugten, 2010; 2011, Zapf & Einarsen, 2001). With increasing awareness of the destructive nature of the phenomenon over the past two decades, research has intensified across occupations, particularly during the 1990s (see for example Einarsen, 1999; Einarsen, Raknes & Matthiesen, 1994; Hoel, Rayner & Cooper, 1999; Rayner, Sheehan & Barker, 1999; Zapf, 1999).

There are many factors that have prompted this increase, one of which is the cost to individuals and organisations. Targets of bullying have been found to suffer severe physical and mental problems, such as high levels of stress, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression (Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2003). The impact and cost of bullying on organisations typically include costs associated with replacing targets who leave, low productivity associated with high levels of stress, loss of work, absenteeism, investigations into claimed abuse at work, and legal actions instituted against organisations (Giga, Hoel & Lewis, 2008; Rayner, Hoel & Cooper, 2002).

The study of workplace bullying research in South Africa is limited, with scholars and researchers using mostly surveys that focussed on the prevalence and magnitude of the phenomenon (for example, Cunniff & Mostert, 2012; Steinman, 2003; 2007), on explaining respondents' interpersonal experiences (for example, Pieterse, 2007), and on interpersonal rather than structural issues. The importance of this study is that it bridges the gap between how workplace bullying is perceived and defined within the context of South Africa by looking not just at bullying prevalence. By focussing on the organisational antecedents it also highlights the impact of societal changes on how bullying manifests in organisations. Additionally, while studies of this nature typically focus on singular views (e.g., from targets or bystanders), it derives insights and understanding of bullying from three viewpoints, namely those of targets, human resource (HR) professionals and bystanders. It therefore provides a consolidated three-way view of the phenomenon, including organisational factors that they believe make bullying possible and more likely in their workplaces.

To the best of my knowledge, at the time of researching this thesis, it is the first study to empirically examine the organisational antecedents of a conceptual framework developed by Salin (2003b) in general and in South Africa in particular.

### 1.2.1 Workplace bullying research in South Africa

A good body of literature in South Africa focuses on workplace violence and some place workplace bullying within it (see for example Di Martino, 2002; Steinman, 2002). Di Martino's (2002) country case studies resulted in the development of a 'Framework Guidelines for Addressing the Workplace Violence in the Health Sector'. Brazil, Bulgaria, Lebanon, Portugal, South Africa, Thailand and Australia were commissioned as participating countries. The study was commissioned by the International Labour Office (ILO), the International Council of Nurses (ICN), the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Public Services International's (PSI) (ILO/ICN/WHO/PSI) Joint Committee on workplace violence in the health sector. The ILO/ICN/WHO/PSI study's general definition of workplace violence consisted of two components, namely, physical violence and psychological violence. In this definition, bullying and mobbing are cited as examples of psychological violence. For purposes of the ILO/ICN/WHO/PSI study, workplace violence was defined as;

Incidents where staff are abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances related to their work, including commuting to and from work, involving an explicit or implicit challenge to their safety, well-being or health. (Workplace violence in the public sector (2002:11))

The country case studies combined three methodological approaches, namely, literature reviews, group discussions and qualitative interviews and surveys. The South African case study was undertaken by Dr Susan Steinman. The country study by Steinman (2002) was conducted in 32 health facilities in the Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan region. 52.9% of the facilities were public and 47, 1% private; 78% of the 1018 sample were women. The participants represented a broad range of health professions such as midwives, nurses, physicians, health support staff, doctors, etc. All the country case studies found that when violence forms part of, and/or is imbedded in in a society, it is most likely to spill into the workplace. Violence was also found to permeate the workplace in the South Africa case study. The high level of violence in the case of South Africa was attributed to the country's socio-economic problems. In the study, up to 71.1% of the public sector respondents reported having experienced workplace violence compared to 51.6% in the private sector. Additionally, 25.5% of the

study's respondents in the public sector, against 10.1% in the private sector reported to having witnessed episodes of physical violence in the past twelve months. The study's findings also showed that workplace violence appeared to spread across all health categories of staff.

Notwithstanding the fact that workplace bullying is often studied within the umbrella term of workplace violence, in this research, the focus is specifically on workplace bullying and, as a result, its literature review centres on bullying, not the broad topic of workplace violence.

Limited research has been carried out on workplace bullying in South Africa and, as a result little is known about the phenomenon (Pietersen, 2007). Steinman, a pioneer in workplace violence in South Africa, is also considered as a leading scholar in workplace bullying research. Steinman, previously Marais, made inroads into the world of workplace bullying in 1997 through her seminal book 'Corporate Hyenas in the workplace', co-authored with Magriet Herman. In a 2000 study conducted by Steinman through the Work Dignity Institute she founded, 77.8% South Africans surveyed reported to having experienced bullying in the workplace. In her later work, Steinman (2007; 2010) positions workplace bullying and workplace violence within the context of organisational factors such as the organisational culture, poor management and the culture of restructuring.

More recently, studies by Pietersen (2007), and Cunniff and Mostert (2012) have shown that bullying is prevalent and endemic in the South African workplace. For example, an online self-administered questionnaire study by Cunniff and Mostert (2012) reported a 31% bullying prevalence among the participants, and different bullying experiences among targets, depending on their socio-demographic characteristics. Employees with higher socio-demographic characteristics, such as education and skill levels were found to be more resistant to workplace bullying than those with lower ones.

Workplace bullying research undertaken in South Africa, with the exception of the study by Pietersen (2007) which used a phenomenological method, has tended to focus on individuals as the unit of analysis, with surveys being the dominant source of data

gathering. The study by Pietersen (2007) explicated the respondents' interpersonal experiences of bullying, with results highlighting the nature of behaviour and/or negative acts bullies used against their targets. The study also found racial tension to be one of the main contributors to bullying. In South Africa, race and gender have been found to be prominent socio-demographic influences to workplace bullying. For example, an earlier study by Steinman (2003) found women to be more prone and vulnerable to bullying in the workplace than men. The racial and gender tension findings pointed to the importance of incorporating context in studying the workplace bullying phenomenon, especially in a country such as South Africa with its history of racial and gender discrimination.

While survey studies are useful for generalisability, an important limitation in studying a phenomenon such as workplace bullying using a quantitative approach is that surveys fail to cover and present the multiple realities, 'truths' and perspectives held by different individuals (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). This study contributes to workplace bullying research in South Africa by using an interpretivist approach and focussing on organisational antecedents.

### **1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Until two decades ago, bullying was largely associated with children terrorising each other in the school grounds. In South Africa, for the most part, many workplaces still associate it with schoolchildren and playgrounds, with extant definitions largely based on research conducted in Western societies. South African research, albeit limited compared to Western countries, has done well in establishing the prevalence of workplace bullying, particularly its effects on targets and impact on organisations. Significant studies were done in the public sector with bullying studied within the broad umbrella of workplace violence. More recent developments in the bullying literature have called for greater attention to context and interpretative approaches that provide thick descriptions of the phenomenon, as well as structural influences.

## **1.4 PURPOSE STATEMENT**

The purpose of the study is to investigate, analyse and describe the ways in which bullying is perceived and defined by targets, HR professionals and bystanders in the South African workplace. It also explores what participants considered to be the organisational antecedents of bullying in the workplace. The ultimate aim of the study is to understand how different players make sense of how and why bullying happens, and of their role in bullying situations, and to contribute to workplace bullying research in South Africa and in general.

## **1.5 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

The major objectives of this research are as follows:

- To gain insight into how bullying is perceived by targets of bullying, Human Resource (HR) professionals and bystanders.
- To ascertain whether there is a distinction between bullying and other types of negative acts at work, such as sexual harassment and discrimination.
- To gain insights into whether bullying is associated with personal conflicts or organisational issues, or both.
- To identify the factors that lead individuals to label their experiences as bullying.
- To identify the organisational antecedents of bullying.

The research was guided by the following four questions:

1. How is workplace bullying perceived and defined by the targets, HR professionals and bystanders?



2. How does bullying differ from other negative acts at work, such as sexual harassment and racial discrimination?
3. What factors influence the targets' perceptions of and feelings about being targeted?
4. What are the organisational antecedents to bullying?

## 1.6 RESEARCH SCOPE AND APPROACH

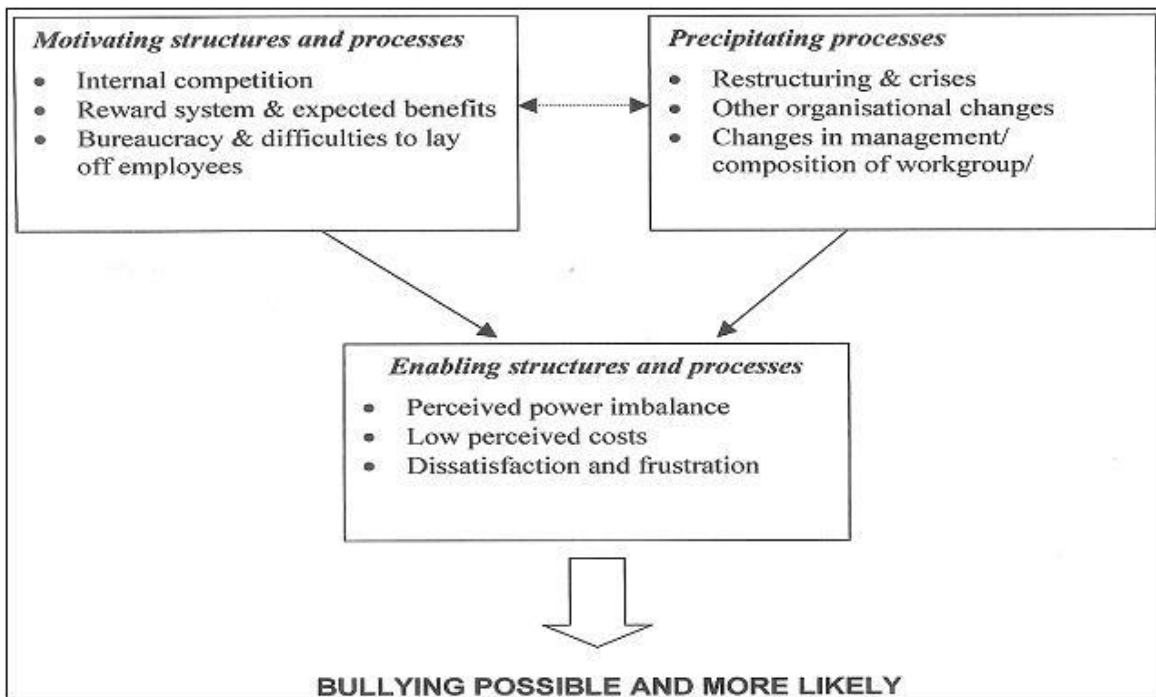
This study sets out to investigate how targets, HR professionals and bystanders perceived and defined bullying, and what they perceive to be organisational antecedents of bullying in the context of South Africa. To this end, the study did not focus on identifying the antecedents to particular incidents of bullying. This approach was taken because the literature suggests context influences how bullying is perceived. Participants were drawn from private sector organisations in the financial services and manufacturing industries, and provided different perspectives. Data was gathered<sup>1</sup> through semi-structured interviews with targets and HR professionals, and by conducting focus group discussions with bystanders. Secondary data was collected through the review of organisational policy documents and targets' bullying records. The study had two main delimitations. First, it was confined to companies in two industries domiciled mainly in the Gauteng Province, out of a total of nine provinces in South Africa. Second, it did not include bullies amongst the participants. Bullies were excluded from the study due to the uneasiness of the topic and the possibility that the topic may have proved to be a disincentive for people to come forward and self-identify as bullies. Moreover, bullies are known to be reluctant to come forward in workplace bullying related studies (Zapf & Einarsen, 2011).

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<sup>1</sup> Although 'data' is the Latin plural of datum it is generally treated as an uncountable 'mass' noun and so takes a singular verb (*Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 2011, Eds. Stevenson & Waite).

Theoretical and conceptual approaches to the study of bullying in the workplace are underdeveloped, with, few putting forward organisational factors as antecedents. In one notable study, Salin (2003b) proposed a conceptual framework for explaining factors which may lead to bullying, from the findings of a study in which the author summarised the literature on organisational factors that make bullying possible. This conceptual framework (see Figure 1-1, below) is instructional in providing an understanding of the organisational factors that serve as catalysts for bullying. The framework also serves as this study's conceptual framework and was used to structure the data collection approach and for initial data analysis.

**Figure 1-1: The study's conceptual framework**



Source: Salin, 2003:1,214

Figure 1-1 (above) suggests that the likely occurrence of bullying in organisations is shaped by three processes. First are the organisation's structures and processes and the choices its leaders make about internal competition, reward systems, expected

benefits and internal people processes. Second are the organisation's design and related change processes. Third are the organisation's structures and processes that shape the climate, behaviour, levels of dissatisfaction and frustration and perceived power imbalance.

Implicit in Salin's (2003b) framework is that performance-based reward systems, in which groups perceive each other as competitors, are seen to induce workplace bullying (Klein, 1996). Consequently, group cohesion is impacted on negatively when members of the same group, department or business unit perceive each other as competition.

The framework also perceives dissatisfaction with the job design and work organisation emanating from organisational changes, such as restructuring, changes in the composition of workgroups and management, to be a significant contributor to workplace bullying. Widespread organisational change often contributes to confusion, fear and lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities, and this creates opportunities for the abuse of power (Einarsen, 1999). Likewise, even anticipated change is said to cause abuse of power (Salin, 2003b). As Salin (2003a) argues, two main examples of bullying associated with poor job design and work organisation are role conflict, which refers to situations when an employee's role is incompatible with his/her expectations, and role ambiguity, which refers to lack of clarity and/or confusion about the responsibilities and expectations of the role (Einarsen et al., 1994).

The hypothesised consequences of the conceptual framework depicted in Figure 1-1 are that, where all the motivating processes and conditions are present, bullying is possible and likely to occur, and that the causes of workplace bullying should not be restricted to individuals (bullies and targets), but must also be extended to organisations. Consequently, there have been calls for more studies on the role of organisations in bullying. This study heeds the call for researching the organisational antecedents of bullying, in addition to understanding how targets, HR professionals and bystanders perceive and make sense of how and why it occurs.

## 1.7 CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE RESEARCH

The aim of this study is to understand how targets, HR professionals and bystanders perceive and define bullying, as well as what they perceive to be organisational antecedents of workplace bullying in South Africa. Additionally, the study's aim is to compensate for the limited research into workplace bullying in South Africa. The study used a qualitative method of inquiry as a way of heeding calls for bullying research to move away from functionalist paradigms to non-functionalist ones, such as interpretivism (Samnani, 2013). Consequently, the study shifted from examining workplace bullying as only an interpersonal problem by considering organisational antecedents. Salin's (2003b) conceptual framework on workplace bullying was used to examine and explain organisational contributors to bullying in the workplace, from data collected through interviews and focus groups.

The study's research contributions are both theoretical and practical, providing a South Africa-specific, that is, context sensitive perspective to the growing body of knowledge regarding ways in which bullying is perceived relative to other negative acts at work. From a theoretical perspective, the study makes a significant contribution by expanding Salin's (2003b) conceptual framework to illustrate how larger societal issues impact on bullying in the workplace and help to understand organisational antecedents.

Additionally, the research makes a contribution to the body of knowledge regarding how the literature depicts players and their roles in bullying situations. The study argues against placing workplace bullying players into discrete categories because individuals' experiences can fall into more than one category. For example, in this study, bystanders and HR professionals also reported being targets. Similarly, while research tends to study bullying players separately, in this study different players, most notably targets and bystanders, formed part of one study to get a much more consolidated view of how they made sense of bullying in the workplace.

From a practice or practical perspective the study makes a contribution by highlighting the need for HR professionals to raise awareness and educate both managers and

employees about the prevalence of bullying and how they can counteract its effect in the workplace. The study also makes a contribution on a policy level by identifying areas in which changes may be required to legislation and policies in support of workplace bullying as a phenomenon in its own right, separate from sexual harassment. Lastly, perhaps the study's significant contribution is the expansion of Salin's (2003b) organisational antecedent's framework, by including larger societal antecedents which contribute to bullying in the workplace. This study's expanded conceptual framework can be used as the basis for future research on societal antecedents of workplace bullying.

## **1.8 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

The study adhered to the required ethical standards required by the University, and for conducting qualitative research. Participants had to provide their consent to participate voluntarily in this study and were given the choice to opt out at any time. Their privacy and confidentiality were protected at all times during and after the study. I had to mitigate the influence on the research of my own experiences around the issue of bullying, particularly any bias in favour of the targets. While subjectivity is not completely absent from any research study, I kept a diary and field notes and conducted member checks after analysing the data. I acknowledge my subjectivity and share reflections on doing the research in Chapter 9.

## **1.9 KEY DEFINITIONS**

There is continuing debate about factors and types of behaviour that constitute bullying, however the common theme revolves around the effect of these unwelcome negative behaviours on bullying targets (Rayner & Cooper, 2006).

### 1.9.1 Defining workplace bullying

Prevalence studies around the world have fuelled the increase in workplace bullying research over the past 20 years (Samnani, 2013), but despite this growing body of knowledge central questions around what bullying is and what it is not remain unanswered. For example, not all researchers agree with regards to the role of intent in bullying and defining workplace bullying has thus turned out to be difficult. Even in Europe, where research into the phenomenon began, there is still difficulty in defining it (Carbo & Hughes, 2010). Different researchers and authors use different terms, for instance, in the United Kingdom (UK) and Ireland, Australia and Northern Europe, researchers predominantly use the term 'bullying' (e.g., Hoel & Cooper, 2000; O'Moore, 2000; Rayner, 1997; Sheehan, 1996; Einarsen, 1999; Salin, 2001; Vartia, 1996), whilst German and Norwegian researchers, on the other hand, use the term 'mobbing' (Zapf et al., 1996; Einarsen, 2000), because the act is often carried out by two or more people, or a 'mob' as opposed to one person (Saunders, Huynh & Goodman-Delahunty, 2007).

There is no generally accepted definition of workplace bullying in the case of South Africa, other than as part of harassment in the Protection from Harassment Act, 2011. In North America, workplace bullying has been studied under a variety of terms such as 'employee abuse', 'workplace aggression', 'victimisation' and 'workplace incivility' (e.g., Keashley, 1998; Neuman & Baron, 1998; Cortina, Magley, Williams & Langhout, 2001). These various labels are often used interchangeably to describe the phenomenon of workplace bullying.

The use of country-specific definitions of workplace bullying stems from what researchers in those countries consider as bullying behaviour. Salin (2003b), Einarsen (1999), Einarsen and Skogstad (1996) and Saunders et al. (2007) agree that the distinguishing characteristics between workplace bullying and conflict of any form is the frequency, duration and persistence of the unwarranted behaviour, as well as its effect on the target. This view is supported by Rayner, Sheehan and Barker (1999), who argue that the features of bullying which seem likely to gain universal agreement are frequency and duration of unwarranted, negative bullying behaviours.

While a universal definition of workplace bullying does not exist, frequency or repetitiveness, severity and power differential, seem to have garnered widespread agreement as being key to defining workplace bullying. Table 1-1 (below) provides a summary of different terms and definitions.

**Table 1-1: Bullying and mobbing definitions by country**

Bullying	
Definition	Source and country/region
<p>“[T]he deliberate, hurtful and repeated mistreatment of a Target (the recipient) by a bully (the perpetrator) that is driven by the bully’s desire to control the Target ... [C]ontrol is typically a mixture of cruel acts of deliberate humiliation or interference and withholding of resources and support preventing the target from succeeding at work.”</p>	<p>Namie &amp; Namie, (2000: 3) [United States (US)]</p>
<p>“[R]epeated and persistent negative acts towards one or more individual(s), which involve power imbalance and create a hostile work environment.”</p>	<p>Salin, (2003:1214) [Scandinavia]</p>
<p>“[H]arassing, offending, socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone’s work tasks. In order for the label bullying (or mobbing) to be applied to a particular activity, interaction or process it has to occur repeatedly and regularly (i.e. weekly) and over a period of time (i.e. about six months). Bullying is an escalating process in the course of which the person confronted ends up in an inferior position and becomes the target of systematic negative acts. A conflict cannot be called bullying if the incident is an isolated event or if two parties of approximately equal ‘strength’ are in conflict.”</p>	<p>Einarsen <i>et al.</i>, (2003:15) [Scandinavia]</p>
<p>“[A] situation where one or several individuals persistently over a period of time perceive themselves to be on the receiving end of negative actions from one or several persons, in a situation where the target of bullying has difficulty defending him or herself against these actions. We will not refer to a one-off incident as bullying.”</p>	<p>Rayner <i>et al.</i>, (2002:24) [UK]</p>



Bullying	
Definition	Source and country/region
<p>“Repeated actions and practices that are directed to one or more workers, which are all unwanted by the victim, which may be done deliberately or unconsciously, but clearly cause humiliation, offence, and distress, and that may interfere with job performance and/or cause an unpleasant working environment”.</p>	<p>Rothmann &amp; Rothmann, (2006:14) [South Africa]</p>
Mobbing	
Definition	Source and country/region
<p>“[E]motional assault [that] begins when an individual becomes a target of disrespectful and harmful behaviors, innuendo, rumors, and public discrediting; a hostile environment is created in which one individual gathers others to willingly, or unwillingly, participate in continuous malevolent actions to force a person out ... [A]ctions escalate into abusive and terrorizing behavior; ... victim feels increasingly helpless ... The individual experiences increasing distress, illness and social misery.”</p>	<p>Davenport, Schwartz &amp; Elliot, (2002:33) [US]</p>
<p>“[H]ostile and unethical communication which is directed in a systematic way by one or a number of persons mainly toward one individual ... These actions take place often (almost every day) and over a long period (at least six months) and, because of this frequency and duration, result in considerable psychic, psychosomatic and social misery.”</p>	<p>Leymann, (1990:120) [Scandinavia]</p>

There are at least four distinguishable features of the bullying phenomenon which can be derived from the definitions presented in Table 1-1. First, bullying involves negative

behaviour that is humiliating and hurtful to the target. Such negative behaviour entails verbal and psychological aggression by an individual or a group against one person or group. Second, a feature which is common in all definitions across the Scandinavian countries, the UK and the USA is the repetitive nature of the negative behaviours associated with bullying, that is, behaviour that is systematically meted out on a target occurs over time, typically over at least six months. To this end, a once-off conflict is not regarded as bullying. Third, bullying creates hostile work environments. For the most part, workplace bullying thrives in organisational environments in which reported cases of bullying are covered up or ignored. If the bullies' behaviour is not acted upon, and therefore goes unpunished, they indirectly become encouraged to continue their bullying. By doing nothing about reported cases of bullying, hostile work environments are created in which it flourishes. Fourth, another common feature is the bullying targets' helplessness and inability to defend themselves against the bullies who often have positional power and authority in the organisation. Different authors agree that the targets' feelings of helplessness and defencelessness may be due to an imbalance of power between the bully and the target, where the bully's perceived power is derived from his or her position in the organisation's hierarchy

Over time, with more research on bullying, the terms 'bullying' and 'mobbing' came to be understood to mean the same thing. Researchers, based on the country or region in which they carry their studies, use either term (Einarsen, 1999; Hoel & Cooper, 2000; Rayner et. al., 2002; Salin, 2001, 2003; Vartia, 2001; Zapf 1999).

### **1.9.2 Workplace bullying and other negative behaviours at work**

The literature on workplace bullying suggests that the term 'bullying' is often considered as something of a euphemism, thereby contributing to the view that it has not been taken as seriously as it should have been (Vickers, 2001; Steinman, 2007). Bullying at work is often confused with or disguised by other forms of work problems, such as sexual harassment, racial discrimination and violence (e.g., Rayner & Cooper, 1997;

Caponecchia & Wyatt, 2009; Steinman, 2007). Rayner and Cooper (1997) argue that it is enough for a person to have 'felt' bullied for it to have occurred. Additionally, Einarsen (2000:8) argues that there is a fine line between forms of bullying and harassment: "...although the concept of bullying, or in Norwegian (mobbing), normally refers to incidents of non-sexual and non-racial harassment, such problems can also be implied in this concept".

However, when one looks at harassment from the vantage point of the law, a clear distinction between it and bullying exists because harassment is, in most countries including South Africa, punishable by law. Discrimination based on race, sex, or religion violates the law, but bullying, apart from in a few countries in Europe, does not. A further distinction lies in the difficulty of detecting and quantifying bullying as most of it is carried out covertly and also because most of the damage happens 'internally'. That is, the damage happens psychologically rather than visible physically. Bullies are usually hard to identify because they are good office politicians, manipulative and often operate under-cover. On the face of it, and in the public eye, bullies come across as civil and very cooperative, whereas away from it they can be ruthless and use their social ability and political skills to be destructive towards their targets (Treadway et al., 2013).

Regarding the link between workplace bullying and violence, Rayner and Hoel (1997) argue that while there is some overlap between workplace bullying and workplace 'violence', such as verbal or physical aggression between people, this association is problematic in that violence can happen between strangers and can be a once-off incident. This differs from bullying, characterised by "repeated and persistent negative acts towards one or more individual(s), which involve a perceived power imbalance and create a hostile work environment" Salin (2003b:1214). However, a study by Steinman (2003) conducted in the South African health sector found a link between workplace bullying and workplace violence. The argument for this relationship was first advanced by Einarsen and Matthiesen (2002). It appears from the foregoing that the definition of workplace bullying is influenced by different factors.

Various studies have sought to differentiate workplace bullying from other forms of negative social interactions at work, such as sexual harassment, victimisation, emotional abuse and discrimination (see for example, Caponecchia & Wyatt, 2009; Crawford, 1999; Davenport, Schwartz & Elliot, 2002, Simpson & Cohen, 2004). Similarly, further studies showed a link between bullying and negative, hostile organisational environments (Einarsen, 1999; Leymann, 1996; Salin, 2001, 2003; Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik & Alberts, 2006; Väänänen, 2003; Vickers, 2001; Zapf, Knorz & Kulla, 1996). Many researchers claim that the distinguishing features between workplace bullying and these other forms of negative behaviour at work are persistence (Einarsen, 1999; Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2003; Salin, 2001, 2003; Zapf, 1999); escalation (Davenport et al., 2002; Leymann, 1990); and patterned negative acts (Einarsen & Hoel, 2001).

Although research distinguishes workplace bullying from sexual harassment or racial discrimination, Einarsen et al. (1994) argue that they “represent different aspects of the same problem”. Notwithstanding any distinction, researchers generally acknowledge the linkage between workplace bullying and other forms of harassment and victimisation, but warn of the danger of conflating forms of negative organisational ills in a way that obscures the distinct features of bullying (Caponecchia & Wyatt, 2009; Crawford, 1999; Davenport et al., 2002).

Despite the general acceptance and usage of the terms ‘bullying’ or ‘mobbing’ in international research, the term ‘workplace bullying’ has yet to become widely used in South African workplaces and academic circles. Instead, ‘harassment’ is the more commonly understood and used term. As is the case in many countries, harassment in South Africa is protected by law under the aegis of the Protection from Harassment Act 17 of 2011, which provides a clear definition, namely:

- Unwelcome sexual attention from a person who knows or ought reasonably to know that such attention is unwelcome;
- Unwelcome explicit or implicit behaviour, suggestions, messages or remarks of a sexual nature that have the effect of offending, intimidating or humiliating the

complainant or a related person in circumstances which a reasonable person having regard to all the circumstances would have anticipated that the complainant or related person would be offended, humiliated or intimidated;

- Implied or expressed promise of reward for complying with a sexually oriented request; or
- Implied or expressed threat of reprisal or actual reprisal for refusal to comply with a sexually oriented request (Protection from Harassment Act 17 of 2011).

Additionally, clear guidelines on what constitutes harassment are provided by the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA), an independent dispute resolution body established in terms of the Labour Relations Act, 66 of 1995 (LRA), which does not belong to nor is controlled by any political party, trade union or business.

Significantly, the guidelines on harassment provided by the CCMA cite bullying as an example or form of harassment. The guidelines define other examples of harassment as,

- Spreading malicious rumours, or insulting someone, particularly on gender, race or disability grounds;
- Ridiculing or degrading someone – picking on them or setting them up to fail;
- Exclusion or victimisation;
- Unfair treatment, based on race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, etc.
- Overbearing supervision or other misuses of power or position;
- Making threats/comments about job security without foundation;
- Deliberately undermining a competent worker by overloading and constant criticism, and
- Preventing individuals progressing by intentionally blocking promotion or training opportunities (CCMA Info Sheet: HARASSMENT, 2002).

It is important to note that all the examples of the CCMA guidelines on harassment match many of the definitions of workplace bullying and/or mobbing in the bullying

literature (see for example, Davenport, Schwartz & Elliot, 2003; Einarsen et al., 2003; Leymann, 1990; Namie & Namie, 2000; Rayner et al., 2002).

Notwithstanding the aforementioned distinguishing factors of the bullying phenomenon, the lack of a shared understanding associated with definitions of workplace bullying impacts on the understanding of the problem (Rayner & McIvor, 2006). In instances when the organisation does not share a common definition of bullying it is unlikely to recognise the negative behaviour of an offender as bullying, and this is likely to create an environment in which it thrives.

In the absence of a universally agreed definition of workplace bullying, for purposes of this study it is understood to be “repeated and persistent negative acts towards one or more individuals, which involve power imbalance and create a hostile environment” (Salin, 2003:1214). This definition was chosen and preferred to others because it incorporates organisational antecedents and aligns to the study’s conceptual framework used for data collection and data analysis.

### 1.9.3 Players in workplace bullying

All bullying situations have three players, namely, the bully, target and bystander.

- **The bully:** the term bully, or perpetrator, refers to the individual who demonstrates behaviour that is considered bullying. Hornstein (1996) identifies three types of bullies, namely, conquerors, performers and manipulators. Conquerors are characterised by bullying behaviour which seeks to exercise power and control over those that the bully may perceive as threats. Performers are described as bullies with low esteem who often cover it by belittling their targets. Lastly, manipulators are the vindictive type of bully with high levels of self-interest. Examples of their bullying behaviour vary from taking credit for excellent work performed by others, typically targets, to blaming others instead of taking responsibility for their own mistakes.
- **The target:** Targets are victims of bullying, or, employees who are bullied.

- **The bystander:** Bystanders are employees who witness the bullying but are not bullied themselves.

#### 1.9.4 Research design and methodology

This study used in-depth qualitative interviews as its primary research method. Qualitative interviews differ in style and approaches (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). The different styles include topical oral histories, life histories, and evaluation interviews (Rubin and Rubin, 1995).

- **Topical oral histories:** Topical oral histories interviews seek to understand and document important historical events from the subjective experience of people who were part of, and/or experienced that historical event. In the case of South Africa, what came to be known as the *Rivonia Trial* is a good example of such a historical event. The Rivonia Trial is a trial that took place in South Africa between 1963 and 1964 in which ten leaders of the African National Congress (ANC), including Nelson Mandela were charged on charges ranging from recruiting people for training in guerrilla warfare, to conspiring to wage a military war to topple the erstwhile South African regime. The ten *trialists* are good examples of what Rubin and Rubin (1995:27) would refer to as *conversational partners* an interviewer would seek out, in this case, to understand what happened and how they experienced the trial in relation to how it is generally understood.
- **Life histories:** Life histories are similar to biographies. However, they offer a deeper focus on the person's experiences as he or she passed through the different key phases of their lives. In the example above, the Rivonia Trialists would, through their life stories and narratives, offer an interpretation and deeper understanding of why and how the trial came to be known as "the trial that changed South Africa", for example.
- **Evaluation interviews:** These types of interviews set out to ascertain whether or not what was intended by interventions such as projects or programmes occurred as

was intended and/or expected. Through evaluation interviews, the researcher is able to establish the success, gaps or limitations of the researched programmes.

This study's model of qualitative interviewing is closely related to the interpretive research. This approach differs from the positivist approach. The two approaches are described below;

- **The interpretive approach:** This research approach supports the belief that meaning and/or truth is constructed through interaction and that this would differ from person to person, or place to place. The approach emphasises the role of context in generating and understanding meaning (Rubin & Rubin, 1995) and therefore believes in the existence of multiple truths. The methods commonly used in interpretive studies include interviews, case studies, examination of documents and observation of events / subjects under investigation (Locke, Silverman, & Spirduso, 1998).
- **The positivist model:** Positivist researchers, unlike the interpretive researchers, believe in the single version of the truth. Unlike the interpretive researchers who seek to understand the phenomenon under investigation from the perspective of participants, positivists look for the 'uniform, precise rules that organize the world' (Rubin & Rubin, 1995:32).

## 1.10 THESIS STRUCTURE

The thesis is divided into nine chapters. Chapter 2 provides a critical review of the workplace bullying literature with specific reference to antecedents of bullying and theoretical approaches to the study of bullying, as well as research questions which guided the data collection and analysis. Chapter 3 presents the research design and methodological approaches and processes used for data collection and data analysis. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 present and discuss the study's findings in relation to its research questions. Chapter 7 discusses the theoretical and practical implications of the findings, while chapter 8 provides a summary of the study's contributions, limitations and



propositions for future research. Chapter 9 shares my personal reflections during the process and journey of conducting this study.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

Scientific research into bullying is relatively recent, traceable to the 1980s in Scandinavian countries. Heinz Leymann (1932–1999), a German-born psychiatrist who lived in Sweden, is credited with creating an interest in workplace bullying after his research was published in the public domain. Leymann (1990) drew parallels between his experiences in working with bullied children and his adult patients, subsequently publishing research and his ideas on the phenomenon, which with spread to other Scandinavian countries, notably Finland and Norway. His research breakthrough in studying adult aggression and negative behaviour at work, which he termed ‘mobbing’ because the abusive behaviour was aimed at a target by a group of individuals or ‘mob’, as opposed to one individual, led to growing research interest in adult bullying at work. Andrea Adams, a pioneering British journalist coined the term ‘workplace bullying’ in 1992 after she applied bullying to adulthood misery (Namie, 2003:1). Adams, in collaboration with Neil Crawford, raised awareness of workplace bullying in Britain. They linked the connection between negative childhood experiences with negative behaviour in adulthood. Namie and Namie introduced the term ‘workplace bullying’ in the United States popular press in 1998. In South Africa, Susan Steinman is credited with creating an awareness and interest in workplace bullying and workplace violence in particular. Since then, a plethora of definitions, antecedents, and theoretical approaches to the study of workplace bullying have emerged around the world.

This chapter explores extant literature on workplace bullying, with a focus on organisational antecedents of bullying, approaches and theoretical perspectives to workplace bullying research. In addition, it explores and presents key debates in workplace bullying, and concludes by pointing to important questions that need to be answered.

## **2.2 ANTECEDENTS OF WORKPLACE BULLYING**

It is generally assumed that characteristics of the target, bully and environmental factors contribute to the onset of bullying in the workplace (Vartia-Väänänen, 2003), however, notwithstanding the assumptions, earlier research tended to focus on explaining the nature, features, forms, prevalence and impact of bullying on the target (Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2003). A further focus tended to be on individual factors, such as the characteristics of the bully and the target associated with, or contributing to bullying. Research on environmental factors associated with workplace bullying is less extensive than studies on individual factors, despite general agreement that what happens inside organisations is inextricably linked to the external environment (Khalib and Ngan, 2006).

### **2.2.1 Environmental antecedents**

Earlier research on workplace bullying primarily focussed on the experiences of individuals exposed to prolonged mistreatment at work (Einarsen, 1999) and on examining the emotional and physical impact of bullying on targets (Vie, Glasø & Einarsen, 2012). These individuals would typically be the target (victim) or the perpetrator (bully). Although earlier workplace bullying research focussing on individuals should not be ignored, it is important to note that bullying is also more likely to be influenced by the environment (for example, Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf & Cooper, 2003; Lewis, 2006; Salin, 2003a; and Vartia, 1996). A study by Salin (2003a) found a positive correlation between trends and changes in society and the prevalence of bullying in the workplace. Examples of these societal changes include globalisation, economic meltdown, work intensification and related expectations to do more with less. Research shows that these external changes may lead to an increase in abusive conduct by managers (Sheehan, 1996; WBI 2010 Survey). Workplace bullying is therefore a complex and dynamic phenomenon which must be understood within context.

Environmental antecedents are typically divided into two categories, namely, social (Neuman & Baron, 2011), and organisational (Hoel & Salin, 2003; 2010). The former

are associated with relationships at work, which are a function of business practices and related social conditions which make bullying at work likely to occur and thrive (Neuman & Baron, 2011), whereas the latter consist of factors related to the characteristics and general atmosphere of the organisation (Hoel & Salin, 2003; Salin, 2003a; 2003b).

### **2.2.1.1 Social antecedents**

Social antecedents of workplace bullying are factors associated with employees' perceptions about how they are treated at work. These often provide a lens through which employees view and interpret not just their relationships at work but also their work environment. Neuman and Baron (2011) describe the social antecedents of workplace bullying within what they termed the norm of reciprocity and injustice perceptions. The norm of reciprocity may be explained in relation to the maxim that people will do unto others as others have done unto them (Neuman & Baron, 2011). It refers to the norm of repaying what one has received. When an individual becomes a target or victim of a social behaviour, such as aggression at work, that individual feels aggrieved and in turn feels the need and obligation to retaliate. The urge to 'repay' the bad treatment, if unchecked, can spiral into bullying behaviour if one party lapses into an inferior position (Einarsen, 2003).

### **2.2.1.2 Organisational antecedents**

Organisational antecedents consist of factors related to the characteristics of the work environment and general atmosphere of the organisation that make bullying at the workplace more likely. Examples more likely to lead to bullying include organisational culture and climate, leadership, changing nature of work, and work organisation (Hoel & Salin, 2003). The work environment and general atmosphere is often influenced by the external social environment. For example, increasing pressure for organisational efficiencies, restructuring and downsizing as a result of economic conditions bring 'survival-of-the-fittest' attitudes which often lead to bullying in the workplace. The targets

of bullying often do not report cases of bullying for fear of victimisation or loss of their jobs.

With all the changes and the speed with which they occur in today's world and organisations, research on workplace bullying has shifted focus towards factors within organisations which make bullying likely. These factors highlight work situations such as organisational change, culture, climate, competition, role conflict and features of leadership, as key contributors to bullying situations at work (e.g., Einarsen, Raknes & Matthiesen 1994; Hoel & Cooper 2000; Zapf 1999; and Zapf, Knorz, & Kulla, 1996). Studies on organisational antecedents of workplace bullying see bullying as a symptom of organisational dysfunction (see for example, Hoel et al., 2010; Liefoghe & MacKenzie-Davey, 2001; O'Moore & Lynch, 2007; Salin, 2001; 2003a; 2003b; Vartia, 1996; Vartia-Väänänen, 2003; Zapf, 1999; Zapf et al., 1996). According to Zapf (1999), employees' actions are often a direct reaction to problems in the working environment. Leymann (1996) argues that organisational factors, such as leadership practices and climate, account for the prevalence of bullying in the workplace and not the characteristics of individuals.

Various studies on the organisational antecedents of workplace bullying indicate that work environment factors offer explanations for the causes of bullying at work (e.g., Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996; Hoel & Salin 2003; O'Moore & Lynch, 2007; Salin & Hoel, 2010). Research by Hoel et al. (2010), Vartia (1996), Einarsen (1999), Leymann (1996) and Salin (2003b) has revealed a strong prevalence of bullying in work environments, characterised by negative organisational culture and low satisfaction with leadership styles. More studies have found the connection between leadership or management style and subordinates' perceptions of their superiors' behaviour with claims of bullying at work, as well as the correlation between higher reports of bullying and an autocratic style of leadership (e.g., Hoel et al., 2010; Hoel & Cooper, 2000; Vartia, 1996; O'Moore & Lynch, 2007).

A study by O'Moore and Lynch (2007) found a positive correlation between bullying and leadership style; bullying and a negative stressful working environment; bullying and

poor management, and respondents' reports of being bullied and the social climate of their direct work environment. The findings of O'Moore and Lynch (2007) are similar to those of an earlier study which also showed a positive correlation between bullying and what Salin (2003a) termed "a politicized environment". The latter study also concluded that bullying in overly competitive work environments is seen as part of organisational politics. Similarly, Vartia (1996) had earlier found a positive correlation between bullying and low levels of satisfaction with the organisational climate, exacerbated by high levels of internal competition and envy associated with 'winning'. Figure 2-1 (below) depicts a pattern in the results of the various studies in terms of correlates to bullying.

**Figure 2-1: Research studies' correlates to workplace bullying**

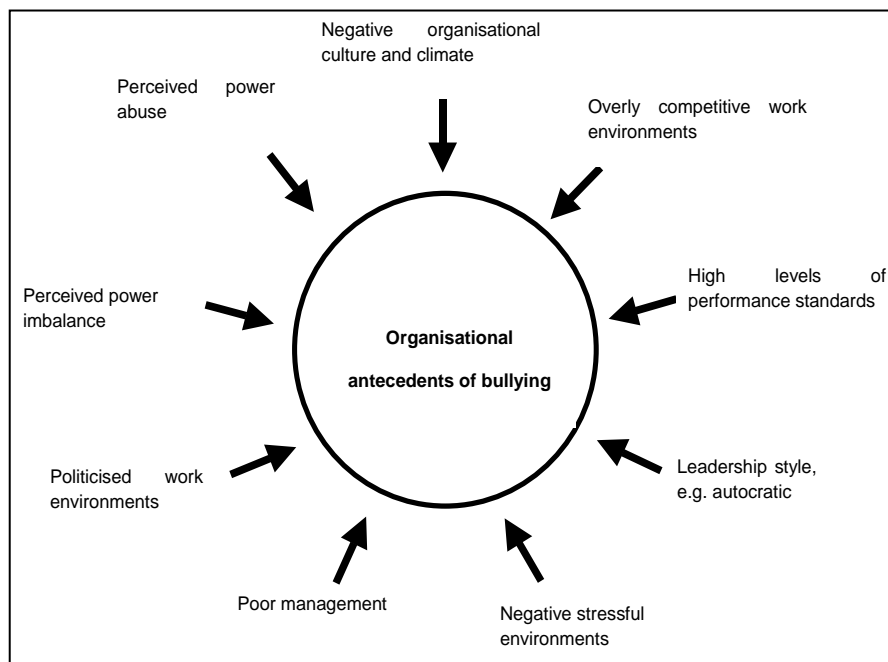


Figure 2-1 (above) suggests that bullying is likely to occur and flourish in work environments characterised by abuse of power derived from a perceived imbalance between those occupying powerful positions and regular employees. Additionally, research has also shown that factors such as poor management and/or autocratic leadership styles contribute to negative stressful environments that ultimately lead to

negative organisational culture and climate. Further research has also shown the impact of competitive work environments on bullying.

The work of Salin (2003b) is instructive in explaining organisational antecedents of workplace bullying, using a model which grouped organisational factors associated with bullying into three categories, namely, enabling structures (e.g., perceived power imbalances, low perceived costs, and dissatisfaction and frustration); motivating structures (e.g., internal competition, reward systems, and expected benefits); and precipitating processes (e.g., downsizing and restructuring, organisational changes, and changes in the composition of the workgroup). The study concludes that bullying is often a result of the interaction of structures and processes from all three categories (Salin, 2003b).

Later studies on organisational antecedents of workplace bullying support Salin's (2003b) research (for example, Baillien, Neyers, De Witte & de Cuyper, 2009; Baillien, Neyers & De Witte, 2011; and Georgakopoulos, Wilkin & Kent, 2011). A study by Skogstad, Matthiesen and Einarsen (2007) found that organisational changes were moderately associated with task-related bullying and culture (Baillien et. al., 2011), where employees are pushed to work in an environment with very tight task-related schedules and deadlines. The same study by Skogstad, Matthiesen and Einarsen (2007) also found that exposure to more and consistent organisational changes increase the likelihood of employees being bullied.

Similarly, a study by Georgakopoulos, Wilkin and Kent (2011) found that organisational cultures in which leaders either do not understand the concept of workplace bullying or how it manifests will resultantly dismiss claims of bullying. Likewise, Baillien et al. (2009), in a study that sought to integrate individual and work-related antecedents, found individual factors such as frustration, insufficient coping abilities, and destructive habits escalate with organisational change.

The next section examines further theoretical developments in workplace bullying research and theorises the interpretations and people's reactions to bullying situations.

## **2.3 APPROACHES AND PERSPECTIVES TO BULLYING RESEARCH**

Workplace bullying is a relatively young discipline, having only a 30-year history of research and theoretical development. Many of the theoretical frameworks and approaches used to explain and understand it borrow heavily from psychology, management and organisational studies theories. Three approaches underpin the study of workplace bullying, detailed as follows (Quine, 1999).

### **2.3.1 Descriptive / epidemiological approach**

The descriptive/epidemiological approach is based on self-report, which entails asking respondents whether they had experienced bullying based on a definition provided. This approach uncovered and documented prevalence rates and other bullying aspects, such as forms, features and types of bullying, as well as differences from a gender and racial perspective. Examples of descriptive features of bullying include repetition, duration, escalation, harm, hostile work environment and power imbalance / disparity.

A feature which is not included due to continuing controversy surrounding it is intent and motivation, which most definitions include, however, many researchers opted to exclude the feature of intent in their definitions because they found it difficult to verify, even though bullying exhibits attributes which denote purposive action (Davenport et al., 2002; Einarsen et al., 2003; Hoel, Rayner, & Cooper, 1999; Namie & Namie, 2000; Salin, 2003a; 2003b).

### **2.3.2 Individualist approach**

The second approach, namely, the individualist approach, investigates the individual antecedents of workplace bullying. It focusses on the role that individuals' personalities play on their propensity to either bully or be bullied. Some researchers argue that the individual's disposition contributes to understanding why certain people bully and why others are bullied (Coyne, Seigne & Randall, 2000). Literature from the 1990s



extensively applied the individualist approach and drew from the field of psychology, for example, Weiner's (1985) attribution theory was used to describe the triggers that make people bully, and for predicting how individuals would assess and respond to bullying-related trigger events. Triggers are behavioural responses to specific situational environments and/or circumstances such as aggression and acts of bullying, and not to arbitrary incidents (Brees, Mackey & Martinko, 2013). These circumstances are labelled 'trigger events' and emanate from interactions in the work environment (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) or personality factors that make bullying and other negative acts at work likely to occur.

Attribution theory (Weiner, 1985) predicts that people will assess and react differently to trigger events. This is understandable when one considers that these are in themselves different. For example, a single experience such as a loss of a job may be a trigger, as may multiple negative interactions and experiences with a supervisor at work (Brees et al., 2013). Other theoretical perspectives incorporate an information-processing element to explain negative acts at work, such as aggression (Brees et al., 2013). Before reacting to a trigger event, the individual tends to assess and evaluate the cause and the likely impact of the outcomes of his/her reactions. The outcome of this information processing and personality factors have a bearing on whether individuals will direct the aggression associated with the trigger event to themselves or others. They generally experience a negative or positive affective reaction (Weiner, 1985), after which they are able to make a connection between the source and cause of the reaction. Different behaviours are then generated once this causality has been established and assigned. As noted above, the application of the attribution theory leads people to respond differently to the same trigger events (Weiner, 1985).

Organisational factors which employees typically cite as causes of trigger events include policies and procedures, organisational culture, norms and climate, as well as working conditions (Salin, 2001, 2003a, 2003b). Over time, employees are able to pick up patterns of how the organisation deals with reported cases of aggression and bullying at work. For example, when nothing happens to specific managers against

whom reported cases of abuse at work are brought, a culture of overly authoritarian management styles persists, resulting in undesirable climate and negative working conditions for those on the receiving end. Culture, which is commonly defined as ‘the way we do things around here’, communicates generally accepted norms and standards regarding appropriate behaviour to employees (Schein, 1990) and has been likened to working as the mental software for humans, influencing how they form their way of feeling, thinking and behaving (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). Similarly, if an organisation’s culture drives a structured performance-based rewards system, and is perceived to protect those in power (Salin, 2003b), in-group competition becomes the norm and accepted behaviour as people strive to over-perform against others in order to get the greatest reward. Individual factors associated with employees who are prone either to being targets or perpetrators of negative acts at work, such as aggression or bullying, include attribution style, negative affectivity, gender, locus of control, core self-evaluation, impulsivity, attitude towards revenge and trait anger (Brees et al., 2013).

Whereas attributions are causal explanations and meaning people assign to their trigger-induced experiences and behaviour, attribution styles are individuals’ tendencies to make the same or similar attributions over time and across different situations. For example, an individual with a pessimistic attribution style is most likely to attribute negative events or failures to him/herself, because this style is associated with self-directed aggression, whereas the individual with a hostile attribution style tends to “attribute failures or negative events to external and intentional causes and believe that others’ actions involve malicious intent” (Brees et al., 2013:257). Studies of attribution and attributions styles on aggression provide important parallels and similarities to workplace bullying. For example, organisational factors that foster bullying are likely to be characterised by competition, rigid policies, and people practices which may be perceived to nurture authoritarian leadership styles (see for example, Aquino et al., 2004; and Salin, 2003a; 2003b).

A study by Glasø, Vie, Holmdal and Einarsen, (2011:198) applied Weiss and Cropanzano’s (1996) Affective Events Theory (AET) “to examine emotional experiences

as a potential mediator between exposure to bullying and job satisfaction and intention to leave, respectively". In the same study, Glasø et al. (2011) also used trait theory, specifically the extent to which trait anxiety and trait anger can moderate the relationship between exposure to bullying and job satisfaction, and ultimately the intention to leave. The study found that the relationship between bullying and job satisfaction and the intention to leave are partly mediated by the targets' emotional experiences (Glasø et al., 2011).

Another study by Lind, Glasø, Pallesen and Einarsen (2009) investigated bullying using personality traits and/or profiles among non-targets and targets. It measured the participants' personality dimensions in accordance with the five-factor model of personality, namely, neuroticism, extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and openness, and found insignificant differences between the personalities of targets and non-targets. Based on this finding, a conclusion can be drawn that the use of personality traits to explain the bullying phenomenon may be inappropriate. Moreover, a factor such as low-esteem may be a consequence of the bullying. This view is supported by Leymann and Gustafsson (1996), who argued that excessive and persistent exposure to bullying situations and behaviour may lead to lowered self-esteem and increased vulnerability

Much of the individualist approach to workplace bullying research also focussed on the target's personality types and traits that supposedly related to the risk of victimisation (see for example, Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2001; Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2007; Vartia, 1996; Zapf & Einarsen, 2003). Most studies reported the targets of bullying as having low self-esteem and self-image, and as being submissive and non-independent. Targets' personalities were also characterised by a lack of sense of humour, and were said to have an external locus of control, which meant that they would easily give up on trying to resolve the bullying, thus opening themselves up for more. The argument about the targets' lack of a sense of humour was advanced by an earlier study by Brodsky (1976), which found respondents to have either a negative view towards humour at

work or a high level of sensitivity to teasing. Individuals with a high sense of humour are more likely to dismiss acts of teasing as jokes.

In contrast, other studies found targets to be more conscientious, hardworking and achievement-oriented in relation to their work than others (Zapf & Einarsen, 2003). These dispositions made them 'stand out', thus drawing undesirable attention from those 'outside' and opening themselves up to being targeted. This view supports the social identity theory that asserts that belonging to one group can lead to acts of aggression and discrimination by those from another (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995).

Exploring the complexity of the workplace bullying phenomenon through more behavioural science theoretical lenses places bullying firmly in the "mainstream organisational behaviour literature" (Parzefall & Salin, 2010:774). The following section examines other theoretical perspectives applied in workplace bullying research.

### **2.3.3 Theory/construct based approach**

The theory/construct based approach to the study of workplace bullying examines how organisational factors such as structure, culture and climate contribute to workplace bullying (Einarsen, Raknes, & Matthiesen, 1994). The approach also focusses on the interaction between individuals within the context of those organisational factors. The theoretical perspectives that have been selected for discussion in the following sections should not be seen as exhaustive, but rather as examples chosen for their relevance to organisational antecedents of bullying in particular, and to the field of organisational behaviour, in general.

#### **2.3.3.1 A social exchange perspective**

The work of Parzefall and Salin (2010) is instrumental in explaining and applying social exchange theory (SET) concepts to bullying. They argue that SET-based concepts are

best placed to shed more light on the study of workplace bullying, since bullying is a manifestation of perceptions of behaviour and relationships between and among people which occur within the context of the workplace. The three SET-based concepts are, organisational justice, psychological contract breach, and perceived organisational support. Through these concepts, Parzefall and Salin (2010) highlight the subjective elements of workplace bullying which previous studies had not fully explored. The primary focus of most studies on workplace bullying had been on studying the prevalence of bullying, its features and / or nature, as well as the impact on the target and bystanders (see for example Einarsen, 1999; Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2003; Einarsen, Raknes & Matthiesen, 1994; Giga, Hoel & Lewis, 2008; Hoel, Rayner & Cooper, 1999; Rayner, Hoel & Cooper, 2002; Rayner, Sheehan & Barker, 1999; and Zapf, 1999).

Perceptions of organisational justice, breach of psychological contract and organisational support provide a means for understanding how employees perceive and make meaning of the manner in which they are treated in the workplace (Parzefall & Salin, 2010). For example, bullying targets perceive their experience as unfair and unjust because exposure to bullying erodes their sense of being treated with fairness, thereby leading them to perceive the experience as unjust (Parzefall & Salin, 2010:768).

The psychological contract embodies the implicit beliefs, promises and commitments that bind the employer – employee relationship at work. These beliefs and promises are informal (unlike formal legal employment contracts, procedures and processes) and are based on individuals' perceptions and interpretations of other people's behaviour and attitude (Parzefall & Salin, 2010). A breach of the psychological contract occurs when the one employee (the target), perceives the other's (the bully) attitude and behaviour against him / her to be violating the generally accepted implicit beliefs, promises and social norms which govern the working relationship between people. Systematic, frequent bullying behaviours are perceived as violating the agreed social norms which inform the unwritten rules of acceptable exchanges among individuals at work. Such violation and breaches result in employees' perceptions of being abused (Keashly,

2001). Such perceived violation leads employees to believe that the organisation is not committed to supporting the employee in meeting her/his needs (Parzefall & Salin, 2010).

Employees perceive organisational support through the quality of the exchange relationship between them and the organisation (Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003). The principle of perceived organisational support (POS) is governed by the norm of reciprocity, such that when one person treats the other well the same person in turn tends to feel an obligation to reciprocate the positive treatment. POS is therefore about the employees' belief that their organisation cares about their wellbeing and values their contribution (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

A study by Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) found that fairness, supervisor support, organisational rewards and favourable job conditions were associated with POS. This in turn led to employees' job satisfaction, which reduced their propensity to want to leave the organisation. The positive feelings and relationships found in an organisation with a high POS depend on processes assumed by organisational support theory (OST), which is based on the premise that employees develop global beliefs around the extent to which organisations value their contributions and care about their overall wellbeing (Eisenberger et al., 1986, 2002; Eisenberger, Cummings, Armeli & Lynch, 1997; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). In addition, POS is derived from the employees' tendency to assign the organisation humanlike characteristics, and using this analogy, employees view supervisors and/or managers as agents of the organisation, and therefore their actions as an indication of the organisation's intent (Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003).

Many studies found a positive correlation between employee engagement / satisfaction and POS (see for example, Aselage, & Eisenberger, 2003; Eisenberger, et al., 2001; Eisenberger, et al., 2002; Eisenberger, Cummings, Armeli & Lynch, 1997; Eisenberger, Fasolo, & Davis-LaMastro, 1990; Eisenberger & Huntington, 1986; MacFarlane, Shore & Wayne, 1993; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; Rhoades, Eisenberger, & Armeli, 2001). Based on the reciprocity norm, POS resulted in high commitment towards the

organisation and reduced the employees' feelings of entrapment associated with employees choosing to stay with organisations in which they are unhappy, due to the high costs of leaving (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

Parzefall and Salin (2010) extended the interpretation of POS into a social exchange approach as a way of contributing to the growing body of knowledge on workplace bullying. Social exchange theorists argue that employees value more highly the support and resources they receive from their employers, if based on the employer's discretionary choice as opposed to circumstances beyond its control (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). By applying the SET-based concepts to workplace bullying, Parzefall and Salin's (2010) argument is instructional in demonstrating the central role perceptions of injustice, psychological contract breach and perceived organisational support play in bullying experiences. Similarly, the concepts offer a different way of relating the negative outcomes of and reaction to workplace bullying (Parzefall & Salin, 2010) to what currently exist in the body of knowledge.

### **2.3.3.2      *A social information processing perspective***

Social information processing (SIP) is a broad framework which informed models (see for example Crick & Dodge, 1996, and Dodge, 1986) formally used to explain the sequence of cognitive processes applied by individuals to inform their responses to stimuli in their environments. The SIP framework is based on theory that describes how mental operations affect the way in which individuals behave and/or respond in social situations (Lemerise & Arsenio, 2000). Researchers used SIP to study types of aggression in children involved in bullying incidences.

Most literature on SIP linked aspects of the theory and the social knowledge to children's aggressive behavioural problems and social competence (see for example, Crick & Dodge, 1994; Dodge, 1986). The literature and social knowledge of children's behaviour is based on the premise that "...children's understanding and interpretation of

situations influences their related behaviours”. Based on this premise, Crick and Dodge (1994), and Dodge (1986) argue that social information processing begins in childhood, as at an early age a child responds to and in turn attends to both internal and external cues, which Crick and Dodge (1994) and Dodge (1986), refer to as ‘encoding’.

Dodge (1986) framed children’s ability to make sense of external social stimuli, within the SIP model, through which children generate behaviour in interacting with their social environment. The processes are:

- encoding of cues
- interpretation of cues
- clarification of goals
- response access or construction
- response decision
- behaviour enactment.

Encoding of cues involves the perception of both internal and external stimuli in the social environment, which are the source of interpretation, meaning-making and response generation, as well as behavioural enactment in the later processes. According to Dodge (1986), the child uses the stimuli as the basis for making causal attributions, searching for and assigning interpretive responses based on the evaluation of goal attainment, past performance and self-evaluations. Once social information from the stimuli is attended to and interpreted, the information is encoded into a node link memory structure (Huesmann, 1998:82). Next, the child searches for and selects what he/she deems to be the appropriate response, derived from the child’s own understanding of the outcomes, consequences and expectations which come with the range of behavioural responses available. Finally, the child enacts the chosen behaviour confident that it is the best within the context of what is socially acceptable. Ultimately, the quality of the child’s response decision and enactment determines the extent to which he or she may be socially accepted.



The SIP provides important parallels and similarities to workplace bullying. Given that the initial interest in Scandinavian countries was popularised by the parallels Leymann (1990) drew between his experiences in working with bullied children and his adult patients who reported being bullied at work, the SIP framework can be used to advance existing individualist approaches to the study of workplace bullying by way of explicating the underlying cognitive processes applied by perpetrators involved in bullying situations at work. For example, behaviour that fosters bullying in the workplace is likely to be characterised by SIP model-related processes that generate the bullies' behaviour in interacting with, and responding to their tough, fast-paced and hard target-driven organisational environment.

The use of information processing models to examine human behaviour received prominence in studies of human problem-solving (Huesmann, 1998). The information processing model of social behaviour was designed to explain potential inputs which lead to certain behaviours in specific environments (Huesmann, 1998). It is not surprising that SIP is now being used to explain bullying behaviour in the workplace. A study by Ferris et al. (2007) suggests that bullies are socially and politically skilled individuals who use their bullying behaviour strategically to choose the targets they can coerce to achieve their own work-related objectives.

A study by Treadway et al. (2013) lends support for Ferris et al.'s (2007) argument that bullies understand their social environment and strategically use it to their advantage to advance their own personal goals without being perceived as doing something wrong. In applying the SIP model to workplace bullying they chose political skill, a specific social construct skill, which they argue has been designed for workplace applications. Ferris et al. (2005:127) define political skill as "the ability to understand others at work, and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one's personal and/or organizational objectives".

Individuals who possess the political skill at work have the ability to read the environment, identify and recognise where sources and pockets of power and influence lie in an organisation. They in turn use this skill to leverage the power differentials in the

workplace to their own advantage (Treadway et al., 2013). In the case of bullies, Treadway et al., (2013:276) argue that bullies use their political skill to manipulate the workplace environment to serve their own goals. To this end, the authors argue that the political skill construct is helpful in explaining the power dynamics of bully-target relations. Lastly, in utilising the Crick and Dodge (1996) SIP framework it can be concluded that bullies tend to be skilful manipulators and are more effective in using their SIP abilities to their own advantage.

The next section looks at the bully-target relations with a particular focus on the target's reaction to bullying. The section is aimed at shedding more light on the target's reaction to bullying from a learned helplessness theory lens.

### **2.3.3.3      *Learned helplessness perspective***

Targets' responses to and coping with workplace bullying are well documented. For example, Baillien et al. (2009) suggested four main types of targets' likely response to continuous exposure to bullying situations, (i) exiting the organisation; (ii) reporting and discussing the problem; (iii) avoiding the problem with the hope that the bullying would 'go away'; and (iv) passively ignoring the problem. Although a reasonable amount of research has been undertaken on targets' responses to and the impact of bullying, theoretical explanations to their response are limited. As mentioned above, the theoretical explanations of workplace bullying borrow heavily from theories of psychology. For example, Samnani (2013) draws on Seligman's (1975) learned helplessness theory to explain why targets may not respond to specific forms of bullying.

According to learned helplessness theory, the interaction of two or more factors influences whether feelings of helplessness experienced in one situation will be experienced in another (Alloy, Peterson, Abramson & Seligman, 1984). According to Alloy et al. (1984:681) "people who exhibit a style of attributing negative outcomes to global factors will show helplessness deficits in new situations that are either similar or

dissimilar to the original situation in which they are helpless”. Samnani (2013) supports this in arguing that learned helplessness theory can be useful in explaining targets’ responses or non-responses to specific forms of bullying. For example, employees who see and interpret the bullying as a function of the context and environment within which negative behaviours appear to be tolerated are less likely to react to the bullying. Using the learned helplessness theory logic, the targets’ inactive response is explained through the association of their current bullying experiences to similar previous situations. The same conclusion can be reached regarding understanding bystanders’ interpretations and reactions to workplace bullying. While such a conclusion may be valid, the social influence theory is much better placed to provide insights into why witnesses of workplace bullying become silent spectators.

#### **2.3.3.4      *A social influence perspective***

There are three main players in workplace situations, namely, the bully, the target and the bystander. The extant literature on workplace bullying in general, and the limited studies on witnesses of bullying in particular, is silent on theoretical interpretations and explanations of bystanders’ reactions to bullying situations. Studies of witnesses of workplace bullying ranged from describing bystander behaviour, types of witness roles and related decisions, to bystanders’ difficulty in detecting subtle forms of bullying (see for example, D’Cruz & Noronha, 2011; Einarsen et al., 1994; Namie & Namie, 2000a).

Prior to the work of Samnani (2013), theories borrowed from psychology, which were used as a basis for theorising workplace bullying behaviour focussed on bullies or targets, and not so much on bystanders. Samnani (2013) uses the social influence theory as a basis for interpreting the bystanders’ behaviour in bullying situations. Social influence theory suggests that certain underlying principles and beliefs underpin people’s tendency to behave and/or react in a particular way. Cialdini and Goldstein (2004) focus on forms of social influence such as compliance and conformity, which they argue inform peoples’ views about expected and acceptable ways of behaving to external social influences. In addition to compliance and conformity, they argue that

social norms such as authority and obedience also influence particular sets of behaviour. Accordingly, “individuals are frequently rewarded for behaving in accordance with the opinions, advice, and directives of authority figures” (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004:595). Their conceptualisation of these social influences has key implications for bystander reactions.

Samnani (2013) borrows from Tedeschi (1983) and uses fear, coercive and aggressive behaviours as forms of social influence to explain behaviour choices bystanders make in bullying situations. Fear of punishment may be the reason bystanders chose not to intervene in bullying situations, especially if doing so may be perceived as going against the behaviour exhibited by employees who are perceived as influential. Other researchers reported similar findings, especially in instances in which the bullying behaviours were subtle. Subtle bullying behaviours often cause confusion in the target and witnesses because they are difficult to identify. The confusion becomes more pronounced when the perpetrators blend the subtle bullying behaviours with performance deliverables and work goals (Hoel & Beale, 2006; Parzefall & Salin, 2010).

Other studies found that witnesses opted to keep their distance from the target, fearing punishment or falling out of favour with the perpetrator, especially if he or she was one of the influential members of the organisation, for example, a manager (D’Cruz & Noronha, 2011; Heames & Harvey, 2006). These bystander reactions and choices represent a social influence force which may ultimately ensure that the witness remains ‘safe’ from the perpetrator / manager, and/or remains a member of the manager’s ‘in-group’ (Heames & Harvey, 2006). Moreover, due to their formal hierarchical positions, managers and supervisors have the capacity to influence employees’ behaviours toward the organisation or other supervisors (Frone, 2000).

Studies have found that characteristics such as organisational status, for example managers, have been found to be related to workplace bullying (see for example, Einarsen, 1999; Einarsen, 2000; Hoel et al., 2001; Rayner & Hoel, 1997; Salin, 2003a; 2003b). The most commonly used identities in organisations are ‘management’ and ‘employees’. Furthermore, managers’ positional powers are believed to make them

more prone to bullying (Salin, 2003b). In the following section, I apply social identity theory to explaining workplace bullying.

### **2.3.3.5      *A social identity perspective***

As shown in the preceding sections, there are many theoretical frameworks and approaches to explaining bullying and reactions to it, one of which is social identity theory. The seminal work of Tajfel (1959) is credited with developing this as a framework for explaining how individuals perceive and categorise themselves relative to others within the context of intergroup relations, group processes and the social self (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). Social identity finds prominence in social competition, which resides within the two complementary processes of social categorisation and social comparison (Hogg & Mullin, 1999; Hogg & Terry, 2000).

The social identity process of how individuals categorise themselves was advanced by Turner (1982) through the development of the self-categorisation theory, providing means for understanding how groups define themselves as members of an in-group or out-group (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). According to Haslam (2001), Hogg and Terry (2000), social categorisation is a process by which individuals create allegiances by classifying themselves and others according to how they perceive themselves to be similar (in-group), or different to others (out-group). People use these perceived similarities and differences to define in-groups and out-groups (Hogg & Terry, 2000).

Difference is used to exclude others and put them in out-groups, whilst conversely, similarities are used to include others and put them in in-groups (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Examples of characteristics used to define the groups include race, gender and age. In organisations, the roles and positions, such as manager, supervisor, or subordinate and organisational distinctions such as business division, unit department and profession, can also define membership (Schneider & Northcraft, 1999). In essence, categorisation of self and others into in-group and/or out-group defines people's social identity (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995:261). Once people define themselves as belonging to one of the

groups they are reacted upon within the context of what the group they belong to embodies. According to Hogg, Terry and White (1995), group membership depersonalises people, that is, they perceive individuals as an embodiment of the group they 'represent' as opposed to seeing them as individuals.

Self-esteem is one of the primary factors for the development of social identity (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Schneider & Northcraft, 1999), and is derived from social comparison, which as the term denotes, is a process wherein people compare themselves to other individuals, groups and social categories. These comparisons often happen within the context of in-groups or out-groups, where people in the same group tend to favour people in their in-group at the expense of those who belong to the out-group (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Schneider & Northcraft, 1999). The most common identities in organisations are management and employees, as "them and us" (Branch et al., 2004). Social identities provide a means for understanding behaviour between members of the in-group and of the out-group, whilst shared social identities within groups increase the differences between the two, more amplified during times of uncertainty or major organisational change, and perhaps leading to conflict (Schneider & Northcraft, 1999), perceived power imbalance and a greater likelihood of bullying likely (Salin, 2003b).

The basic idea of social identity theory is that the social categories into which individuals feel they belong, in addition to defining their identity, define their self-concept (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). That is, the manner in which individuals think about themselves is largely influenced by the groups to which they belong. Until recently, social identity theory was rarely used to explain workplace bullying. Salin and Hoel (2013) draw on social identity theory to illustrate how one's identity, such as gender, can contribute to becoming a target of bullying, and how being a member of the gender identity may influence reactions to bullying. If one accepts the argument of Salin and Hoel (2013) it follows that organisational factors such as the nature of leadership, organisational climate and culture, as well as changing the nature of work, may be perceived as a threat to the in-group if its members are employees with hierarchically lower positions (Branch et al., 2004; Salin & Hoel, 2003). The application of social identity theory to

workplace bullying has the potential to shed more light on why people bully others, and how those witnessing the bullying react as they do. Additionally, recent attention to intersectionality in organisations also suggests that in addition to gender identity, race, ethnicity, religion and sexual orientation may be important in understanding workplace bullying.

Research into workplace bullying has recently passed a key milestone, namely, 20 years of research by scholars and practitioners. This appears to have started a process of stocktaking and review of the extant literature with a view to identifying and highlighting gaps to inform the expansion of future literature (see e.g., Bartlett II, & Bartlett, 2011; Branch, Ramsay, & Barker, 2013; Samnani, & Singh 2012). The gaps for future research cover some of the continuing debates on workplace bullying, examples of which include the problem of not having a universally agreed definition of bullying, limited theoretical foundations and conceptual models for workplace bullying, and lack of research on the role of bystanders in bullying prevention and intervention strategies.

## **2.4 CONTINUING DEBATES IN WORKPLACE BULLYING RESEARCH**

Debates and controversies remain around key factors relating to the definition and measurement of workplace bullying. These are discussed in the section below.

### **2.4.1 Defining and measuring bullying**

Despite research advances made over the past two decades, defining workplace bullying remains a difficult task (Carbo & Hughes, 2010), particularly how it is identified. Some researchers adopt an operational method, whereby participants use behavioural scales of instruments such as the Negative Acts Questionnaire (NAQ) developed by Eirnsen and Raknes (1997), or the Leymann Inventory of Psychological Terror (LIPT) developed by Leymann (1990) to determine if respondents have been bullied or not (Lewis, Sheehan, & Davies, 2009). For these approaches, commonly referred to as estimation methods, a research participant is defined as a target if he/she has

experienced several behaviours listed on the instruments for a considerable time (Carbo & Hughes, 2010). The LIPT is much more stringent than the NAQ, as for a person to be regarded as having been bullied he/she must have been exposed to one or more of its 45 acts on a weekly basis for more than six months. This stringent measure of bullying typically led to lower reporting rates.

Under the NAQ, a research participant is regarded as a target of workplace bullying if he/she has experienced one of the listed behaviours in the NAQ on a regular basis for up to six months (Carbo & Hughes, 2010; Lewis & Gunn, 2007). The NAQ also includes a self-report question, with behavioural scales grouped into factor analysis, which broadly are managerial, organisational, or peer-to peer/social bullying (see for example Lewis & Gunn, 2007). However, the NQA's ability to measure other features of bullying, such as intent, persistency and power imbalance, has been questioned (see Hershcovis, 2011). Other factors around which questions were raised include the role of cross-cultural issues in describing and/or measuring workplace bullying (e.g., Giorgi, 2010). For example, employees from Hofstede's (1980) high-power distance countries may view bullying behaviour from hierarchical or positional leaders as normal and acceptable.

The second approach to determining prevalence of bullying adopts a self-report method whereby research participants respond to questions about whether they have been bullied or not, based on a given definition. The bullying prevalence rates differ depending on the type of approach applied. For example, bullying is likely to be under-reported if the definition used in self-report studies is too narrow. Likewise, if research participants are given the option to develop their own definition of workplace bullying they may come up with a narrow and traditional view of what it is perceived and/or understood to be, thereby omitting other negative behaviours which researchers typically categorise as bullying.

As Lewis, Sheehan, and Davies (2009:284) put it:



Alongside the challenges of providing respondents with definitions and lists of behaviours, there is the need to uncover stories of workplace bullying in the everyday experiences of employees. There is a need to find out whether these common experiences match up to the behavioural items listed in instruments like the NAQ and whether employees define bullying in the same ways as researchers. There is also a need to find out whether employee experiences neatly compartmentalise themselves or whether they are more abstract and disparate.

The assertion by Lewis, Sheehan and Davies (2009) points to the complexity of studying the workplace bullying phenomenon and how not having one universal definition further contributes to the debate about the definition of workplace bullying. Similarly, some studies have found moderate to significant variance in percentage between participants reporting themselves as being bullied under the self-report method and the LIPT or NAQ methods. For example, in a study of Finnish professionals by Salin (2001), 8.8% of the study's respondents self-reported as bullying targets, whereas over 24% were classified as targets using a modified NAQ instrument. A plausible reason for explaining the variances between the two methods of measuring the prevalence of workplace bullying may be due to the subtlety of bullying, and other related reasons associated with bullying, such as respondents not being aware that they are being bullied or not admitting to it due to shame, weakness or other stereotypes associated with being a bullying target (Carbo & Hughes, 2010).

Many researchers are also not unanimous about the inclusion of intent in the workplace bullying definition (e.g., Carbo & Hughes, 2010; Parzefall & Salin, 2010). A study by Carbo and Hughes (2010) found intent not only difficult to measure but also confusing for the respondents. The respondents tended to focus on the perpetrator's actions and outcomes. In many bullying scenarios, targets have the unenviable burden of having to prove that the bullying occurred. To also be required to prove the perpetrator's intent may be almost impossible for the target.

As expected, different researches hold different views about the resultant over- or under-reporting of bullying using any of the two approaches. Moreover, many people define workplace bullying through lenses of specific acts and behaviours which are

considered bullying (Carbo & Hughes, 2010). Others list categories of behaviour as opposed to listing specific behaviours (see for example, Zapf, 1996; 1999).

There has been a call for workplace bullying scholars and practitioners to collaborate, given all the differences in defining and measuring workplace bullying. The call is being made with a view to translating research findings by both scholars and practitioners into effective bullying prevention and intervention strategies. Crawshaw (2009:264) believes “the time has come to begin formulation of a standard nomenclature to facilitate research and development of best practices for intervention and prevention”. Until this collaboration happens, the debates around the plethora of workplace bullying terms and definitions seem set to continue. Notwithstanding the various terms used to describe workplace bullying, researchers and practitioners agree that it is a problem that cannot be ignored. Furthermore, there is general agreement on the impact bullying has on the individual (both the target and those witnessing it) and the organisation. Lastly, the term ‘workplace bullying’ is often used as an umbrella term to incorporate all the negative acts at work, for example, harassment, intimidation and injustice. Moreover, workplace bullying seems to be in a position similar to that of sexual harassment of some 15 years ago, until scholars, legal and human resources practitioners aided by highly publicised court cases in favour of complainants reached consensus and a degree of clarity in the definition of sexual harassment (Fox, 2009).

While Branch, Ramsay and Barker (2013) found the general meaning of the term to be consistently understood in the workplace bullying research community, their study highlighted the need for having a universally agreed definition as part of the solution for addressing the phenomenon. In the same vein, Fox (2009) previously argued for scholars and workplace bullying researchers to take the lead in addressing areas of contention concerning the definition and operational delineation of workplace bullying. The areas of contention include whether behaviours must be frequently repeated and persistent before qualifying as bullying, whether there must be a power differential between the bully and the target, and whether hostile work-based gender and racially-based behaviours should be included under the umbrella term.

Another important yet least researched player in workplace bullying is the bystander, because earlier workplace bullying research saw bullying as a dyadic interaction between the victim (target) and the perpetrator (bully). Later research extended the bullying interaction to include the bystander, after the realisation of the impact the bystander has on the outcome of bullying situations. A bystander is generally defined as someone who has witnessed bullying at work, but has not been bullied himself/herself. More research on the role of the bystander in workplace bullying situations is required.

#### **2.4.2 The bystander role**

Research on the role of bystanders in workplace bullying situations is limited, although they constitute a significant group in many bullying scenarios. Available research often describes bystanders as detached, passive third party and helpless observers (see for example, Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006; Namie, 2000; Rayner, 1999; Vartia, 2001) who choose to remain silent for fear of being bullied themselves. Consequently, bystanders' silence is taken for granted and as something to expect. According to a study by Rayner (1999), one in five bystanders considered leaving rather than speaking up or reporting what they witnessed for fear of being victimised. Namie (2000) also argues that bystanders focus on staying out of the bully's path rather than trying to intervene. That is, in most cases, bystanders' efforts are more about self-preservation than worrying about helping the target.

The focus of other research on bystanders tends to be on the impact of the bullying on the bystander. For example, the results of a study by Vartia (2001) concluded that bystanders reported higher levels of stress as a result of guilt associated with not being able to help the target compared to those who were not bullied or did not witness any form of bullying. However, bystanders' silence and inaction is beginning to be questioned, mainly because they are not always perceived as detached third parties. A bystander's role in a bullying scenario can no longer be taken as just passive, and a study by van Heugten (2011) found that more bystanders actively offered to assist the

victim once they heard that the bully was leaving. Further findings from this study revealed that bystanders often remain silent out of simply not knowing how they can help.

Samnani (2013) found that bystanders consciously or unconsciously take sides in the bullying scenarios they witness, identifying three important roles they play. First, bystanders can overtly support the target. A study by Lutgen-Sandvik (2006) showed that the bully was likely to stop the bullying behaviour when the bystander intervened by openly supporting the target. Second, bystanders often support the perpetrator. Third, bystanders can be silent observers. A study by D’Cruz and Noronha (2011) found that bystanders often took the stance of supporting the perpetrator and/or becoming a silent observer for fear of becoming targeted themselves. According to Tracy et al. (2006), the role is not as simple because often they may not realise the severity of the target’s experiences, especially in instances where the bullying behaviours employed are subtle. Moreover, in some cases, targets themselves are often unaware that what they are experiencing is indeed bullying. In such instances, bullying is even more difficult for bystanders to detect (Hoel & Beale, 2006). Subtle bullying behaviours include the following:

- withholding important information
- excessive monitoring and supervision
- persistent criticism
- social exclusion
- gossip / starting and spreading false rumours about a target
- personal jokes and insults
- taking credit for an employee’s work (Fox & Stallworth, 2005).

Subtle bullying refers to acts that are not immediately apparent and can thus be interpreted and understood in different ways. It has implications for how bystanders make sense of these bullying acts and may ultimately influence their action or non-

action. Subtle bullying acts are often difficult for targets themselves to detect, rendering it even more difficult for bystanders to identify the behaviour as bullying (Parzefall & Salin, 2010). When bystanders do not identify the behaviour as bullying, it follows that they would be less likely to lend their support to the target (Samnani, 2013).

Parzell and Salin (2010) concur in arguing that the more politically savvy and subtle the bully's methods, for example those which combine bullying behaviours with hard performance goals and deliverables, the more the target becomes confused and doubts whether what they are experiencing is bullying or just tough management. The more the target's self-doubt sets in the more difficult it is for someone witnessing the situation to describe and see it as bullying. Consequently, there is a greater chance that individuals witnessing such a situation would not classify the behaviour as bullying. Similarly, there is likelihood that witnesses of subtle bullying behaviours under the guise of performance requirements are unlikely to support the target. Simply put, subtle bullying behaviour casts doubt in a bystander's mind about whether or not what they are witnessing is bullying, thus increasing the likelihood of inaction on the part of the bystander.

Samnani (2013) sheds further light on the conceptualisation of subtle acts of bullying by making a distinction between interpersonal bullying, which happens within the context of the relationship between the target and the perpetrator, and depersonalised bullying, the work environment, for example, in which work conditions represent bullying (e.g., Liefoghe & Davey, 2009; Salin, 2003b). However, in any bullying scenario, employees are still likely to interpret the bullying differently, perhaps perceiving the work environment to be the perpetrator, whereas others witnessing the same might ascribe the positional leader or supervisor as the bully (Samnani, 2013).

Researchers have also found that when the perpetrator is hierarchically an important member of the organisation, bystanders are more likely to side with him or her because they may view siding with the target as 'career limiting'. Similarly, when observers of the bullying may have career advancement aspirations they may view supporting the perpetrator as a politically well-calculated move for advancement, with the hope that the

perpetrator will reciprocate by supporting their advancement, or speak in their favour when the right time comes (Salin, 2003a).

Workplace bullying is now understood and seen as more than just an interaction between the bullying target and the perpetrator. Bystanders have now firmly come to be seen as important players mainly because they have an impact on the outcome of the bullying. Calls are being made about the importance of making bystanders aware of their role and responsibilities in helping to stop its escalation (van Heugten, 2011).

## **2.5 SUMMARY**

Despite the growing research and body of knowledge on workplace bullying, researchers are still not unanimous about key questions at the core of the conceptualisation and the role of bystanders. The different theoretical perspectives presented in the chapter illustrate possible ways in which scholars and practitioners could address the debates (see for example, Bjørkelo, 2013; Brees & Martinko, 2013; Giorgi, 2009; Salin & Hoel, 2013; Samnani, 2013, and Treadway, Shaughnessy, Breland, Yang & Reeves, 2013). In summary, there is limited research on bullying in South Africa and the majority of extant literature on workplace bullying has focussed on bullying as an interpersonal phenomenon, rather than on examining the structural contributors. No studies have, to my knowledge and at the time of writing this thesis, focussed on all targets, bystanders, HR professionals and organisational antecedents at once. Therefore, the study aims to provide a three-way view and understanding of how and why workplace bullying happens in organisations from targets, Human Resource (HR) professionals perspectives, and by looking at organisational antecedents using Salin's (2003b), workplace bullying framework. The following are the main research questions the study will explore.

## 2.6 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Research in workplace bullying in general, and the role of the bystander in bullying situations in particular, is in its infancy in South Africa. This research aims to contribute to bullying research in South Africa, focussing on understanding how workplace bullying targets and HR professionals perceive and define it and organisational factors which make it more likely. It aims to provide insight into understanding the bystanders' role and reaction to workplace bullying situations. The study poses four main questions:

- How is workplace bullying perceived and defined by the targets, HR professionals and bystanders?
- How does bullying differ from other negative acts at work, such as sexual harassment and racial discrimination?
- What factors influence the targets' perceptions of and feelings about being targeted?
- What are the organisational antecedents to bullying?

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

The focus of early research on workplace bullying was on identifying features and causes of bullying at individual and organisational levels, and these were typically examined through a post-positivist lens. In addition, it looked at developing measures of bullying using quantitative methods (Einarsen, 1999; Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003; Namie, 2002; Salin, 2003; Zapf, 1999). Notwithstanding the success and usefulness of a post-positivist lens and quantitative methods to studying workplace bullying, there is an equal need to understand targets' own interpretations of their experiences. Bullied persons make meaning of their bullying experience from their 'lived experiences', so an interpretivist lens and the use of qualitative methods were needed to uncover and provide more understanding. This is evidenced in calls to understand workplace bullying from an interpretivist approach (see for example, Lewis, 2003; Liefoghe & Olafsson, 1999; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008; Tracy et al., 2005), or a non-functional paradigm (Samnani, 2013). The interpretive lens is congruent with Moustakas' (1990) heuristic process which entails data gathering through the recreation of participants' lived experience. Additionally, the interpretive lens is also congruent with Locke, Silverman and Spirduso's (1998:140) view that the basis for the generation of theory is dependent on 'detailed records concerning context, people, actions, and the perceptions of participants'.

This study examined the perceptions of targets, Human Resources (HR) professionals, and witnesses to bullying (bystanders), as well as organisational antecedents of workplace bullying in the context of South Africa from an interpretivist perspective. The approach is premised on the belief that the world is complex and dynamic, that people actively construct and interpret their reality based on interactions with each other and with the wider social systems (Chesebro & Borisoff, 2007; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Miller,



2005). It is further premised on a belief that reality is subjective, that people experience the same reality differently.

The primary research method of this study was in-depth qualitative interviews with targets of bullying and HR professionals, as well as focus groups with bystanders. This study provides a three-way view to expand understanding of the bullying phenomenon. As illustrated in chapter 1, there is a dearth of research in South Africa, and with the exception of a study by Pietersen (2007) which used a phenomenological method, research which has been conducted was from a post-positive perspective using quantitative methods (see for example, Cunniff & Mostert, 2012; Steinman, 2003; 2007). The interpretivist approach seemed best suited for an in-depth exploration of the perceptions, experiences and sense-making of workplace bullying of targets, HR professionals and bystanders in South Africa.

Similarly, I was interested in exploring the research participants' lived experiences against the backdrop of organisational antecedents of bullying in South Africa. As Lewis (1999:98) explained, "by allowing people to speak for themselves to a large extent, qualitative approaches are less likely to fall into the trap of imposing researcher's values and reactions on the situations being studied". The argument by Lewis (1998) is supported by Crotty (1998:6), who reminds us that:

Truth, or meaning, comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world. In this understanding of knowledge, it is clear that different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon.

The above view holds true of a phenomenon such as workplace bullying, which is a highly emotive and subjective topic. It is therefore likely that different people's experiences and realities of bullying will differ. To this end, emotional and subjective issues are best studied in an interpretivist paradigm, underpinned by the understanding that each person's reality is unique.

First, I present a brief description and overview of the research setting to contextualise the study.

### 3.2 RESEARCH SETTING

South Africa is a complex and diverse society with many identities, and a land of contrasts, often referred to as ‘a world in one country’. It is perhaps this notion which speaks to the country’s many social identities. Booysen (2007) argues that South Africa’s transformation to a political democracy after the country’s first inclusive elections in 1994 led to a crisis in social identity. Tajfel (1972:292) defines social identity as “the individual’s knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him or his group membership”. That is, individuals see their existence and derive meaning from the groups to which they belong in relation to others and their groups.

South Africa is in 2014 celebrating 20 years of democracy since the dismantling of apartheid in 1994. Apartheid was an official policy of racial segregation that involved political, legal, and economic discrimination against groups labelled as ‘Blacks’, ‘Coloureds’ and ‘Indians’, who formed the majority of the country’s population. This was enforced through repression and oppressive force against any resistance to the system. During the 20 years of political democracy, the country has experienced and continues to experience profound societal changes, in the form of social, economic and political transformation. All these changes are happening in a diverse society with many social identities. Not surprising given the country’s history of racial segregation, the most salient identity groups remain race and gender (see Table 3-1, for summary).

**Table 3-1: Population estimates by population group and sex, 2014**

Population group	Number of males	% of male population	Number of females	% of female population	Total number	% of total population
<b>African</b>	21 168 700	80,3	22 165 000	80,2	43 333 700	80,2
<b>Coloured</b>	2 305 800	8,7	2 465 700	8,9	4 771 500	8,8
<b>Indian/ Asian</b>	677 000	2,6	664 900	2,4	1 341 900	2,5
<b>White</b>	2 214 400	8,4	2 340 400	8,5	4 554 800	8,4
<b>Total</b>	<b>26 366 00</b>	<b>100,00</b>	<b>27 635 900</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>54 002 000</b>	<b>100,0</b>

Source: Statistics South Africa: Mid-year population estimates, 2014

As shown in Table 3-1 (above), out of the total population of 54 million, females and blacks in general and black Africans in particular, are in the clear majority, hence the prominence of race and gender as the most salient identities in the country.

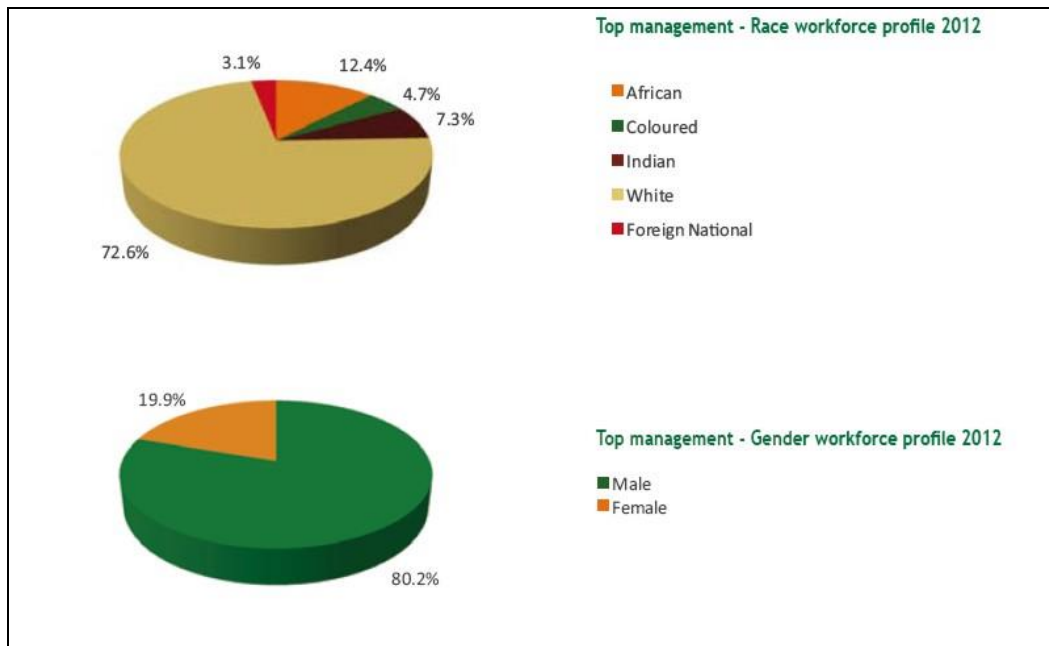
### **3.2.1 Race and gender**

Prior to 1994, power at all levels of society, including the workplace, was the domain of white males. Black Africans were at the bottom of the social, economic and political pyramid, whilst White females by default also held some power due to their association by race to the dominant and powerful White males. However, apartheid intersected with patriarchy and White females were largely relegated to clerical and other female designated careers and positions. Black women were employed primarily as domestics. Management and skilled positions were dominated by White males while Black males were confined to unskilled, menial jobs.

After 1994, new legislation specifically targeted at empowering the previously disadvantaged sector of the society was promulgated. The Employment Equity Act (EE Act) of 1998 is the most notable and significant legislation which was passed. It's overall aim being to create equality in the workplace, by promoting affirmative action and equal access to positions perceived to be the domain of Whites in general, and White males in

particular. These are typically top management positions. However, despite new legislation aimed at promoting affirmative action and redress, Whites are still the most dominant racial group with 72.6% at the top management level, while Africans remain the grossly under-represented racial group at this level (see Figure 3-1 , below, for summary).

**Figure 3-1: Workforce profile at the top management level by race and gender**



Source: Commission for Employment Equity Annual Report, 2012-2013

The data in Figure 3-1 uses the National Economically Active Population as a yardstick, and shows that male representation is also much higher at the top management level than for females.

In 2013, the South African government gazetted the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (“B-BBEE”) Act 46 of 2013 as well as the Revised Codes of Good Practice (“Revised Codes”), which introduced ‘skills development’ as one of its priority elements. The new codes compel organisations to make significant investments towards developing their designated employees, namely, Africans, Coloureds, Indians and people with disabilities. The notion of skills development is not new, but the

Revised Codes of Good Practice have tightened the compliance to the Act by providing guidelines pertaining to indicative amounts corporations must put aside for training and/or developing their previously disadvantaged employees. Notwithstanding the revised Codes of Good Practice, white males and white females continue to benefit from skills development; promotions and training, when compared to other groups (see Table 3-2, below for summary).

**Table 3-2: Race and gender workforce profiles (top management)**

	Male (%)				Female (%)				Foreign National (%)		Total (%)
	A	C	I	W	A	C	I	W	M	F	
<b>Workforce profile for all employees</b>	8.8	3.2	5.7	59.8	3.6	1.5	1.6	12.8	2.7	0.4	100.0
<b>Recruitment for all employers</b>	14.8	3.7	5.6	47.4	7.3	1.7	1.9	11.0	5.9	0.6	100.0
<b>Promotion for all employers</b>	12.6	4.8	6.6	43.1	8.6	2.6	2.6	15.9	2.7	0.5	100.0
<b>Skills development for all employers</b>	13.7	4.1	6.3	47.7	8.2	2.3	2.8	14.8	0	0	100.0

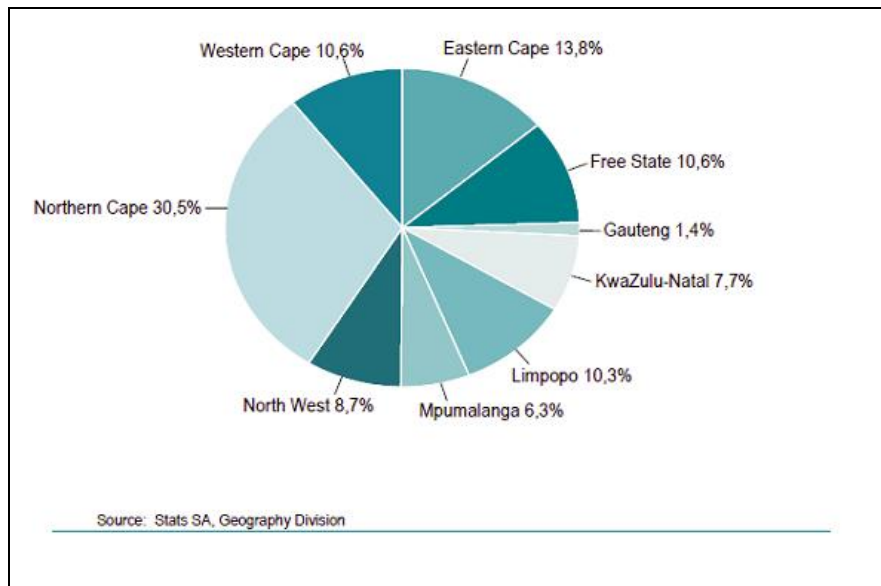
Key: A – African; C – Coloured; I – Indian; W - White

Source: Adapted from the Commission for Employment Equity Annual Report, 2012-2013.

Table 3-2 (above) shows that more than 60% of White employees, male and female, had access to training (skills development), putting them at an advantage for accessing available promotion opportunities in the workplace. Although the data is restricted to the top management level the trend is similar at senior management levels.

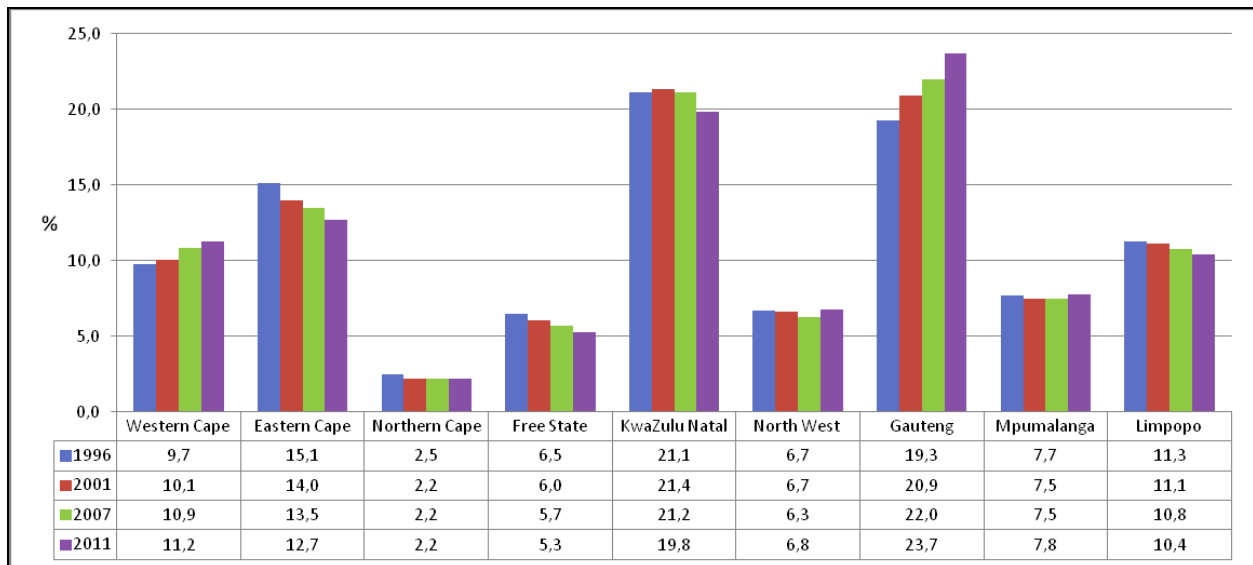
The majority of the study's participants were drawn from the financial services and manufacturing industries based largely in the Gauteng Province. South Africa has nine provinces, and Gauteng is regarded as the economic engine of the country, even though it is the smallest of all provinces as shown in figure 3-2 below.

**Figure 3-2: Percentage distribution of land area by Province, 2011**



Additionally, Gauteng is, despite its size, home to the majority of the population of South Africa as shown in figure 3-3 below.

**Figure 3-3: Percentage distribution of total population by province**

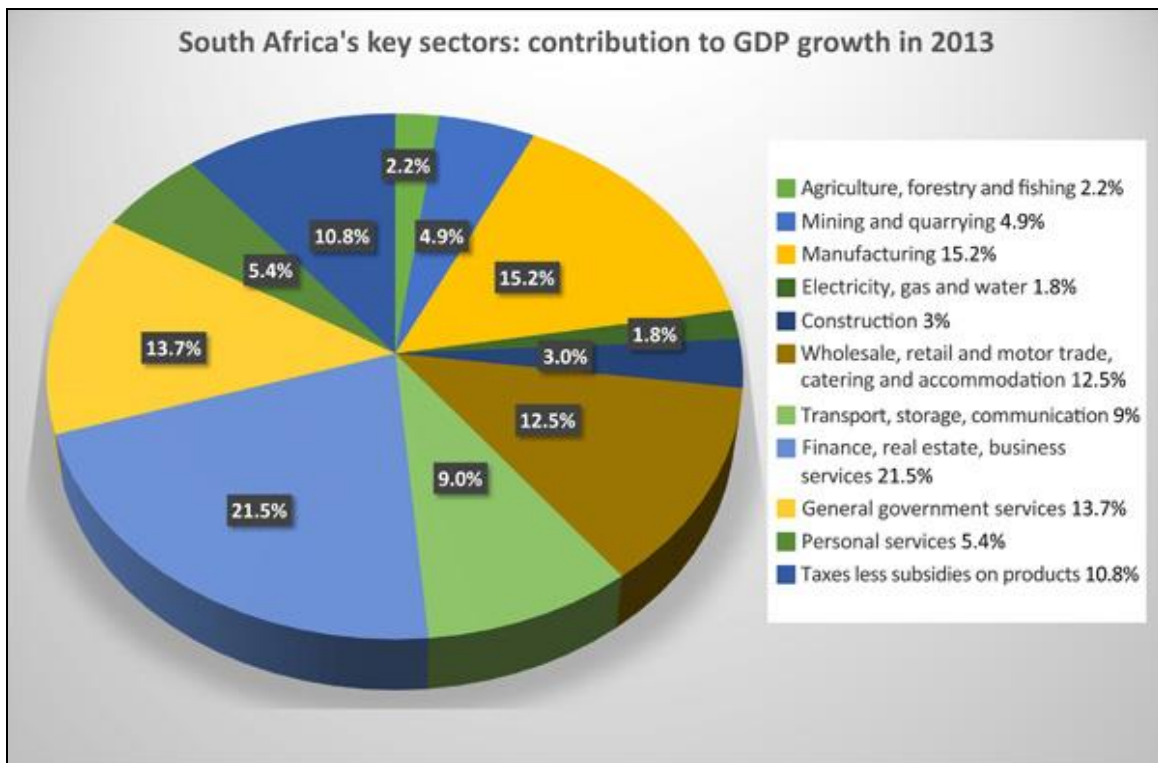


Source: Statistics South Africa: Census 2011 (Census 1996, 2001, 2011 and Community Survey 2007)

Figure 3-3 (above) shows a steady increase in population growth in Gauteng Province during the periods 1996 – 2011, when compared to the rest of the provinces.

The manufacturing and financial services industries are key contributors to South Africa’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth (see figure 3-4 for percentages of sector contribution to GDP growth in 2013).

**Figure 3-4: South Africa's key sectors: contribution to GDP growth in 2013**



Source: Statistics South Africa, 2013.

Figure 3-4 (above) shows that the financial services and manufacturing sectors, together contributed 36,7% to the GDP growth in South Africa.

### 3.3 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS

Qualitative research is a diverse field which grew out of many disciplines, such as anthropology, sociology and history. It seeks to answer the question “*what is going on here?*” as opposed to verifying the ‘truth’. It presumes that multiple truths, realities and meanings exist, and that people construct them from their experiences. For example, Schurink (2009) presumes that what people say is reliable and meaningful. Similarly, according to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), objective reality is best demonstrated and thus known through how it is represented. Qualitative research provides a missing link in studying social phenomena which are not easily quantifiable and are usually multifaceted, which calls for different methods of inquiry to account for their multi-dimensional nature (Silverman, 2009). For Flick (2009), qualitative research is of specific relevance to the study of social relations due “to the pluralisation of life worlds” (Flick 2009:12).

Although the qualitative approach differs from the quantitative, there is no single way of conducting it. In qualitative research, the same phenomenon can be investigated, interpreted and analysed differently, depending on the belief the researcher holds about what constitutes social reality (ontology), and the assumptions he or she holds about what they consider to be true, or how they determine the truth (epistemology). The key ontological issue for researchers is whether to view social reality as objective or external to people’s awareness, or view it as socially constructed based on people’s experiences, actions and perceptions (Silverman, 2009). Ontological models provide a framework through which to view reality, based on two basic beliefs. The first belief states that there is an objective reality in which a researcher could maintain a distant, detached, objective position from the phenomenon being studied. The second asserts that reality can only be constructed and that the researcher and participant are actively involved (Silverman, 2009).

The epistemological models govern the manner in which the researcher decides how social phenomena can be known, including whether and how knowledge can be presented. The models are based on three epistemologies, namely, positivism,



interpretivism, and constructionism. Positivists believe that what researchers see is what there is to see, that is, the researcher is trained to objectively observe and collect evidence to test the truthfulness of their hypotheses or theories (Schurink, 2009). Constructionists and interpretivists, on the other hand, believe that the researcher requires a different method to understand and appreciate the subjective meaning of social phenomena. Interpretivists believe that the researcher cannot maintain a distant, detached and totally objective stance because both the researcher and participant are actively involved in constructing meaning and knowledge emanating from the research (McKenna et al., 2008; Romani et al., 2011). Table 3-3 (below) presents a summary of the research paradigms and associated methodologies.

**Table 3-3: Comparison of research paradigms**

	<b>Positivist Paradigm</b>	<b>Constructivist / Interpretivist Paradigm</b>
Ontology: (Reality)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Believe in existence of one scientific reality</li> <li>• Driven by search for certainty</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Believe in the existence of subjective, constructed and interpreted multiple realities</li> <li>• Reality is constructed through human interaction. Therefore there can never be one truth or certainty</li> </ul>
Epistemology: (Knowledge, reality, truth)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Events/ certainty explained through knowledge, facts, cause and effect; e.g., objective observation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Events are understood through interpretation</li> <li>• Knowledge, reality and the truth is influenced by interaction with the social context</li> </ul>
Methodology (How we gain knowledge about the world)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quantitative</li> <li>• Experimental</li> <li>• Testing</li> <li>• Predicting</li> <li>• Control, etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Qualitative</li> <li>• Case studies</li> <li>• Understanding and interpretation of specific context.</li> </ul>

(Adapted from Archer, 2012)

This study's methods and analysis are informed by interpretivist viewpoints, premised on the belief that people actively construct and interpret their reality based on their interactions with each other, and its approach is underpinned by Flick's (2009) position that the future requires theories that are locally, temporally and situationally located. This means that the research methodology must articulate a phenomenon with local specificity, hence I chose the qualitative methodology for the study.

### **3.4 RESEARCH DESIGN**

This study examined the participants' perceptions and organisational antecedents of workplace bullying. Data was collected by means of in-depth interviews with targets of bullying and HR professionals. In addition, two focus group discussions were held with witnesses of workplace bullying, herein referred to as 'bystanders'.

As mentioned in chapter 1, the conceptual framework used in the study was developed by Salin (2003b), and suggests that the likely occurrence of bullying in organisations is shaped by three processes, namely:

1. The organisation's structures and processes, as well as the choices its leaders make with reference to internal competition, reward systems, expected benefits and internal people processes.
2. The organisation's design and related change processes.
3. The organisation's structures and processes which shape the climate, behaviour, levels of dissatisfaction and frustration and perceived power imbalance.

This framework was used to develop the interview questions and the agenda for the focus groups. Prior to conducting the research I conducted a pilot study to ensure more familiarity with qualitative interviewing and to pre-test the interview questions. The pilot study provided me with the opportunity to test McNamara's (2009) preparation steps for conducting interviews, taking care of the basics as essential before implementing

interviews. These include: (i) verifying that the tape recorder is in full working condition (if used) before conducting the interview; (ii) asking one question at a time; (iii) not showing emotional reactions, that is, remaining neutral during the interview; (iv) staying in touch, and showing interest in what the interviewee is saying by occasionally nodding one's head; and, (v) providing transition from one topic to the other.

### **3.4.1 The pilot study**

I used the pilot study to test the feasibility of the research questions (Jacob & Ferguson, 2012) and methodological quality before the implementation of the study. It helped me to identify flaws and weaknesses in the research design, and afforded me the opportunity to make refinements before the implementation of the study (Kvale, 2007).

#### **3.4.1.1 *The pilot interview process***

I conducted the pilot study with three people who met the study's selection criteria (Jacob & Ferguson, 2012; Turner, D.W., III, 2010), that is, all three participants were close to the population of the study. The first person I interviewed was a target of bullying, the second a bystander, and the third an HR professional. The interview with the bullying target was conducted at her home. The HR professional and bystander interviews were done at their workplace, which was also mine.

All three interviews were tape-recorded to ensure correct usage of the instrument and capturing of all the details and nuances which I later returned to examine further. All three respondents gave permission for the audio-taping of the interviews. They were professionally transcribed, after which I went through each to check for accuracy against the interview audio-tapes, the observational notes, and the analytical notes I completed soon after each interview.

### **3.4.1.2 Observational notes**

During the interviews, I paid attention to the interviewees' body language and non-verbal responses, because making sense of data from interviews is different from data generated through the use of a questionnaire (Polkinghorne, 2005). In questionnaire data the questions posed are held to be constant stimuli to the respondent, and the answers to the questions are generally accepted to be those of the respondents. Conversely, in interviews, their recollections, accounts of what happened and body language in response to the questions asked, and the presence of the researcher, sometimes referred to as 'co-creation', were noted (Polkinghorne, 2005).

Data from non-verbal sources, such as facial expressions, tone of voice, and respondents' behaviour, shed more light on the meaning of what is being said. Another source of data is the place and surrounds in which the interview occurs. According to Polkinghorne (2005), factors such as arrangement of furniture can also serve as indicators of the respondent's experiences. The interview of the target was at the respondent's home, but before the commencement of the interview the respondent asked permission to leave on her cellular telephone because she was expecting calls which might potentially bring her income, since she was now self-employed. I conceded to the request and on at least two occasions the interview was interrupted by the ringing telephone. On each case, as agreed, the respondent answered for varying amounts of time. The distractions highlighted the importance of conducting interviews in quiet, private, or semi-private places, and of setting aside uninterrupted time for interviews (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). I therefore ensured that the interviews for the main study were held in quite, semi-private or private places, with no distractions.

The interviews with the bystander and HR professional fared much better, being held at a place that was quiet and private. Both the bystander and HR professional were my colleagues and their being known to me highlighted the issue of *reflexivity*, which in qualitative research suggests that the researcher is also a participant and thus cannot be divorced from the phenomenon being studied. Similarly, reflexivity suggests that data collection is often influenced by how respondents perceive the researcher, and the

researcher's own biases and prejudices (Holloway & Wheeler, 2002; Kuper, Lingard & Levinson, 2008; Watt, 2007).

According to Kuper, Lingard and Levinson (2008:337), reflexivity refers to “recognition of the influence a researcher brings to the research process. It highlights potential power relations between the researcher and research participants that might shape the data being collected.” Therefore, to achieve credibility of the data being collected I returned to the respondents to validate the data by confirming whether my interpretation of their responses was accurate.

#### **3.4.1.3 Pilot study data analysis**

In qualitative research, data analysis is not strictly separated from data collection (Bradley, 1993; Lancaster, Dodd & Williamson, 2004). Initial analysis in qualitative research typically begins while data is being collected because it is cyclical and evolutionary. Furthermore, data analysis involves organising what has been seen, heard and read from the research literature to make sense of what emerges. The field work, observational notes and analytical notes, as well as the interview transcripts, served as the initial interpretation of data in the pilot study.

#### **3.4.1.4 Methodological insights**

This section presents methodological insights which led to the iterations and refinement of the interview questions and focus group approach I made after the implementation of the pilot study. They emerged during the process of analysing the data, and from the reminder notes I made to myself while conducting the interviews. The main insights presented in this document are around key lessons learnt, specifically around the study's research questions and the process for running the study's focus groups.

#### 3.4.1.4.1 *Lessons learnt*

I learned a great deal about conducting qualitative research. Firstly, writing the pilot report exposed me to new concepts such as reflexivity and the importance of what Wolcott (1990) calls “purposeful reading”. This is continuous review and consultation of literature with the aim of making sense of the data being collected or analysed. Secondly, I learnt about the technique of *iterative process* in qualitative research, which entails using data analysis to concurrently inform data collection during a study (Sprake, Cantillon, Metcalf & Spencer, 2008). Thirdly, I learned the value of keeping a journal and made sure that I put aside time as soon after the interview as possible to write the observational notes, or fieldwork notes. My fourth lesson was about understanding *purposive selection*. The primary goal of qualitative research is to gain a deeper understanding from the individuals who are either experiencing and/or have experienced the phenomenon being studied. In the pilot study, purposive selection highlighted the importance of seeking out individuals who were rich exemplars of bullying at work. Initially, my concern was around the ‘amount’ of data to collect, and the ‘number’ of participants to interview for the study, however, according Polkinghorne (2005), this is not important, rather, “the concern is not how much data were gathered or from how many sources but whether the data that were collected are sufficiently rich to bring refinement and clarity to understanding an experience” (Polkinghorne, 2005:140).

Particularly relevant for an interpretist approach, I applied the insight from Polkinghorne (2005), together with the process of iteration, snowball sampling and member checking to ensure that data being collected was sufficiently rich to provide an understanding of how workplace bullying is perceived in South Africa. Iteration in qualitative research enables the selection of participants to enrich the phenomenon being studied to remain open throughout the research process (Kuzel, 1999), in the same way as snowball sampling requests current participants to recommend new participants whose experiences would be relevant to the study. I subsequently applied both iteration and snowball sampling in the full study.

Lastly, another key lesson I learnt was the importance of flexibility during the interview, that is, the willingness to make “on-the-spot” changes to the interview guide during the interview. At times, during the interviews, follow-up questions which were not in the interview guide were prompted by what the participant said. I learnt to trust my instincts and asked follow-up questions which were not in the interview guide, and in so doing elicited important information which led to the refinement of questions. Equally important, I learnt the ability to distinguish between useful on-the-spot adjustments to be made and those which may detract from the study.

#### *3.4.1.4.2 Refinement of research questions and focus group approach*

The pilot study afforded me the opportunity to test the feasibility of the research questions, the outcome of which led to the refinement of some questions and approach to conducting the focus group. The refined research questions are provided in Appendix C (interview guide for bullying targets), Appendix D (interview guide with HR professionals), and Appendix E (bystanders focus group guide).

The common change across all three interview guides was the inclusion of the study introduction and prompts to remind me to take the participants through the content of the research consent form and for them to sign it. The main changes were in the interview guide with HR professional and the bystanders’ focus group guide. So-called “big, expansive questions” (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012) were included in the interview guide with HR professionals, that is, questions that allowed participants to take the questions in many directions: “When you write big questions your participant might say things that you would have never thought to ask and often those things become one of the most important parts of your study” (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012:4).

New bullying antecedents which are not covered in Salin’s (2003b) model emerged, during the interviews, and those specific to South Africa included: (i) the perceived changing role of Afrikaner men as a result of transformation-related legislative reforms, such as the Employment Equity Act; (ii) having influence as a result of being politically

connected; and (iii) social identity grouping, e.g., being treated differently by virtue of being single rather than having a family, race and gender.

Changes to the focus group approach included having the discussions professionally transcribed, which allowed me more time to listen and ask questions without worrying too much about taking full notes of what was being said. Professionally transcribing the focus group discussions made it easier to determine and analyse the themes emanating from the discussions.

I took the lessons from the pilot study to the research design of the full study, described in the following section.

### **3.5 POPULATION AND SAMPLE**

Initially, the target population for the study was companies in the financial services sector in South Africa, which includes banking, insurance, and investment services. I am employed in the financial services sector and therefore I expected access to potential study participants and HR professionals currently employed in it to be relatively easy and convenient, hence the choice of the sector. Also, most of the workplace bullying research in South Africa has been conducted in the public sector (e.g., Steinman, 2007). However, in the end, the final respondents were from the financial services and manufacturing industries. The manufacturing sector in South Africa includes agriprocessing, automotive, metals, packaging, textiles, clothing and footwear, ICT and electronic industries. The financial services participants were drawn from the insurance and banking industries, and the manufacturing participants from the packaging and metals industries. The manufacturing and financial services sectors represent two key developed and diversified sectors of the South African economy and also happen to be South Africa's key sectors in terms of contribution to the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth (Statistics South Africa, 2013).



### 3.5.1 Sampling

I used purposive sampling to identify research participants, seeking to interview participants who were, knew or had witnessed someone who was bullied at work, and HR professionals. They were drawn in two ways: (a) through an online link to the research on the Institute of People Management (IPM), and the South African Board for People Practices' (SABPP) websites; and (b) through conversations with colleagues, formal and informal professional networks. As a result, one of my professional networks posted a further call to participate in the study on her *LinkedIn* profile, a social networking site used by professionals to connect with colleagues, other professionals or industries to form business-oriented relationships or engage in, and share industry or professional-specific experiences and developments. The IPM and SABPP posted messages on their websites and the professional associate on her *LinkedIn* profile inviting people to participate in my study. The message read as follows:

'Are you bullied at work? Have you ever been bullied at work? Do you know someone who has been bullied at work? Do you work in a financial services sector? Are you an HR professional currently employed in the financial services sector? If you have answered 'yes' to one, or any of the questions above, and if you are willing to share your experiences, [my name] is a doctoral student in Organisational Behaviour at the University of Pretoria with a focus on workplace bullying in South Africa and would like to interview the following types of people:

- People who have experienced bullying at work
- People who have seen others being bullied at work
- HR professionals.

Within a week of IPM posting the link on its website over 10 HR professionals in the financial services and manufacturing industries contacted me. A week later, after the SABPP posting, I received several calls from people who, interestingly, did not initially wish to participate, but were curious to understand what I meant by "workplace bullying". Ultimately, three people from the SABPP link reported as being current targets

of bullying. However, a few people who had initially indicated their willingness to participate in the study later withdrew. The topic of this study might have been a disincentive to participate, given the stigma a phenomenon such as bullying carries. In the telephonic follow-up conversations I had with people who had indicated their willingness to participate some highlighted their confusion and discomfort with the label 'bullying'. This confusion was mostly around the definition, or what they believed constituted bullying and what it did not.

Some respondents wanted me to send them interview questions before deciding whether or not to continue with the study, some asked for a definition of workplace bullying beforehand, whilst others wanted assurances that their participation in the study was completely confidential. The uneasiness with the topic might have impacted on the sample size. Having commenced with the interviews I used the snowball sampling approach to identify more participants, which together with purposive sampling is an important way of identifying primary research participants for in-depth qualitative interviews (Groenewald, 2004). More participants were identified through referrals based on those who had first-hand experience of workplace bullying, or had witnessed bullying, as well as HR professionals working in organisations in the financial services and/or manufacturing industries. Through this approach I found more participants from conversations with HR professionals and targets who signed up to participate in the study. The HR professionals recommended that I approach colleagues they knew were being bullied and those targets in turn, referred me to other colleagues who they knew were being bullied.

In the beginning I interviewed 26 people, of whom 11 were targets of bullying, 9 HR professionals, and two bystander focus groups of three in each group. Kitlinger and Barbour (1999) argue that for sensitive and emotive topics such as workplace bullying it is not only possible, but preferable to hold focus group discussions with three to four members. The participants in this sample represented the experiences and interactions of people who were bullied, or had witnessed bullying at work. Towards the end of the study, I approached four Wellness / Employee Assistance Programme (EAP)

professionals, and ended up interviewing three as the fourth one cancelled at the last minute. I interviewed the (EAP) professionals as part of the HR professionals' sample. EAP professionals are critical for this study due to their role of providing support to employees and their family members on a broad range of issues, including bullying if and when reported. The sample is therefore deemed appropriate for the purpose of the study. Considerable research indicates that sample representativeness is important for any research's transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Regardless of the differences among the sample, that is, based on employees' first-hand experience of bullying, or as witnesses of bullying in the two different industries, my findings suggest that society and what happens within the national context influences how people perceive and define bullying. The current sample's experiences of bullying are likely to be found in other bullying targets and bystanders within the same or similar national context.

The study's final sample size of 29 falls within the University Research Ethical Clearance Committee's approved sample size of 'up to 30' participants. Moreover, samples for qualitative studies are generally found to be much smaller than for quantitative studies. The guiding principle in qualitative research is the concept of 'saturation', which refers to "the point at which no new information or themes are observed in the data" (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006:59).

Based on this study's data set, saturation occurred by the sixteenth interview. That is, consistent themes between my separate interviews with HR professionals and targets began to emerge after nine interviews with HR professionals and seven with targets. Moreover, the identification of themes in this research was aided by the initial elements of the study's conceptual framework. However, notwithstanding the absence of new themes (saturation) from the 16 interviews I conducted five additional interviews with targets to determine target-specific coding saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I continued with the additional interviews for the sole purpose of determining whether there were other forms or natures of bullying, bullying tactics, and organisational antecedents which did not appear from the narratives of participants already interviewed. When the additional interviews produced nothing fundamentally new or

different from those already conducted, I was satisfied that data saturation had occurred (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Lastly, Guest et al. (2006) argues that early saturation is aided by an homogenous sample population and by a study with narrow objectives and a degree of structure whereby participants are asked the same or similar questions. Additionally, Guest et al. (2006) posit that saturation is aided by the goal of the research, which in turn determines the size and representativeness of the sample. For example, if the goal is to describe a shared perception about a phenomenon among a relatively homogenous study population a sample of 12 is likely to suffice.

Participant homogeneity in qualitative research is assumed because in purposive and snowball sampling, participants' choice is based on some pre-determined common criteria (Guest et al. 2006). One can thus conclude that the more similar the participants' experiences regarding the phenomenon studied, the sooner saturation will be reached. In this study, participants were homogenous in that they experienced bullying first-hand, witnessed it, or were HR professionals from organisations in the financial services or manufacturing industries in South Africa. These similarities, together with the objectives of the research to understand how people perceive and define workplace bullying, as well as the connection with the study's conceptual framework which guided data collection and data analysis, were enough to render data saturation with 16 interviews. However, the sample was diverse in respect of demographic characteristics. For example, out of a total of nine HR professionals interviewed, three were White males; two African males; three African females and one White female. Of the 11 targets interviewed, four were African females; four White females; one White male, and two African males. The additional Wellness / EAP professionals were made of two white females and one African male. Lastly, the total focus group members of six were made up one African male and five African females.

## 3.6 DATA COLLECTION

The different methods of data collection used in this study are discussed in this section.

### 3.6.1 Interviews

Interviews were the study's primary form of data collection, since I was interested in understanding bullying from the participants' own subjective and lived experiences. The interviews were therefore central to uncovering and providing more understanding of workplace bullying based on the participants' own experiences. Data was gathered by means of semi-structured interviews. First, I provided a definition of bullying for purposes of this study then checked to confirm whether the interviewees were indeed targets of bullying by asking them to describe the behaviour they considered bullying. Alternatively, I asked if they knew of, or had witnessed actual bullying incidents within the organisation. Each respondent shared his or her bullying experience, often in great detail. I then asked the interviewees to retrospectively describe and analyse the work environmental factors that triggered or influenced their bullying incidents or incidents they witnessed. I used Salin's (2003b) conceptual framework as a frame for collecting information on a broad range of organisational factors which make bullying possible and more likely. By means of the conceptual framework, I also checked for factors that had not been mentioned by the interviewees and therefore were absent from the framework.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with HR professionals and targets of bullying. Semi-structured interviews, while they had pre-determined questions, were the best instrument for collecting data in this study because they allowed participants the freedom to 'deviate' and explore what they felt were important to them, relating to the study (Longhurst, 2003). Nine interviews were held with HR professionals. Three of the participants were from the manufacturing industry, and the remaining six were from the financial services industry. The latter were in either the banking or insurance industry. Two of the participants were Western Cape-based, the others Gauteng-based. The interview guide with HR professionals (Appendix D) consisted of three introduction-

oriented questions and five open-ended questions. Each question had an average of four open-ended sub-questions, and/or follow-up questions, only asked if the participant's response to the main question did not cover sufficient detail. All participants were asked the same questions and in the same sequence, differing only when I felt a need to probe, and/or based on the participant's response and line of conversation.

The 11 interviews conducted with targets of bullying followed the same process as the interviews with HR professionals. Four targets were from the manufacturing sector, five from the financial services sector, and two self-employed after having left their previous employment as a result of bullying. The interview guide with targets (Appendix C) consisted of four structured introductory questions, and ten open-ended questions. Similar to the interviews with HR professionals, some main questions had sub-questions and/or follow-up questions.

The average length of the interviews for both the targets and HR professionals ranged from 45 to 75 minutes. Interviews with targets tended to last, on average, 30 minutes longer than HR professionals. This may be attributed to the many targets having reported finding it therapeutic to talk about their experiences to a neutral person who was willing to listen to their ordeal.

### **3.6.2 Focus groups**

Focus groups are an efficient way of gathering qualitative data in a short time, and are ideal for exploring people's experiences, opinions and perceptions (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999). They were thus most suited for a study which sought to understand how bystanders made sense of bullying, in terms of why and how it happens. Additionally, data from the focus groups were important either to corroborate or refute information from the interviews with targets and HR professionals. The focus group participants were sourced from people who responded to the call to participate in the study, specifically those who responded as people who had seen others being bullied at work.

I chose to combine the focus group method with interviews to enrich the data collection and also because the two methods complement each other. Through focus group processes, interviewers are able to explore a little deeper and clarify views expressed in ways that would otherwise be less accessible in one-on-one interviews (Kitzinger, 1995). The process is enhanced when the focus group facilitator has a series of open-ended questions which participants can explore together. Moreover, focus groups maximise interaction between participants, and offer them the opportunity to explore views, perceptions and issues of importance to them in their own vocabulary, while pursuing their own interest in the topic under discussion (Barbour, 2008).

I conducted two focus groups of three participants each. A few failed to show up but I decided to carry on with the two groups of three, mainly to bring in people on the basis of shared experiences which matched the objectives of the research, and not the size of the group. Ultimately, the group size turned out to be an advantage in that it allowed me the flexibility to interchangeably use the *directive* and *non-directive* approaches (Stewart et al., 2007) in moderating the discussions. The former allows for greater involvement of the moderator in ensuring greater coverage of questions in the focus group guide, however, the disadvantage of this approach is that it may stifle spontaneity of participation, as compared to the latter which allows participants freedom to let their views form without being 'directed' by the moderator (Stewart et al., 2007).

In the beginning of the focus groups, I set the tone by sharing the agenda and the process for the discussions (Appendix E) with the participants. Most importantly, I emphasised the principle of confidentiality. Each focus group discussion took up to two hours, with the bulk of the time being guided by a non-directive approach. Both groups' discussions were professionally transcribed to allow me the opportunity to pay active attention to the discussions and probe and/or re-direct the discussions where necessary. However, I still made my own notes and recorded behavioural non-verbal data, as well as the use of a '*flowery, but stern*' type of language. Flowery and stern is my polite way of describing strong language, often punctuated by cursing.

Information gathered from focus groups was much richer given that respondents capitalised on each other's responses and discussions. The focus group sessions with bystanders provided an additional angle from which to view the phenomenon of workplace bullying. It also allowed for triangulation with the information gathered through interviews with bullying targets and HR professionals.

### **3.6.3 Collection of texts**

The third method of collecting data was through collection of texts. Question 7, in the interview guide for bullying targets (Appendix C) asked them if they had kept any record of their bullying experiences and whether they would be willing to share these and allow me to review them. Of the 11 bullying targets interviewed, only three reported keeping records of the experience, and two shared their records with me. Both targets who shared their records with me were still employed in the organisations where the bullying was happening. These records were in the form of e-mail exchanges and/or letters written either to the target's superior or to themselves as a way of de-briefing their negative experiences of bullying. I employed an interpretive approach in the manner I read the targets' bullying records and looked for themes as described by the study's conceptual framework, as well as for new data which fell outside of the framework.

Similarly, questions 6 (b) and (e) of the interview guide with HR professionals (Appendix D) asked participants what had guided how they dealt with any lodged bullying complaints. All the HR professionals interviewed reported not having bullying-specific policies, but mentioned having harassment and grievance policies which they believed would guide how they would handle reports of bullying, should bullying be reported. In cases in which the participants reported having some form of policies to guide potential bullying reporting I asked whether I could be allowed to review the policies and/or documents. Five of the HR professionals interviewed gave me access to their policies. My approach to these policies was to read them for content, focusing on whether bullying was covered and if there were provisions for reporting such behaviours as well



as consequences for such behaviours. As none of the policies referred to bullying I excluded them from the study's data analysis.

### 3.6.4 Field notes

The fourth mode of collecting data was field notes, which served as both the study's data collection and secondary storage method. The method used was adapted from the model first developed by Schatzman and Strauss (1973). The four types of field notes used during the data collection process were: (i) observational notes (ON); (ii) theoretical notes (TN); (iii) methodological notes (MN); and (iv) analytical memos (AM).

Observational notes were taken on 'what happened' and reflected something which stood out for me during the interviews. Theoretical notes captured the meaning I derived upon reflecting on the observational notes, while methodological notes were iterations from what emerged during the process of analysing data. Examples of these include reminder notes on the research process. These notes also served as a critique of the research study's conceptual framework. Analytical memos are end-of-day progress reviews (Groenewald, 2004).

A summary of the data collection procedure and information sources is outlined in Table 3-4 (below).

**Table 3-4: Data collection procedure and sources**

	<b>Interviews</b>	<b>Focus Groups</b>	<b>Collection of texts</b>	<b>Field notes</b>
<b>Targets</b>	√		√	√
<b>HR practitioners</b>	√		√	√
<b>Bystanders</b>		√		√

## **3.7 DATA ANALYSIS**

Data analysis in qualitative research is a continuous, iterative process which starts in the early stages of data collection and continues throughout all the phases of a study. In this section, I describe the approach I followed to analyse data which, in the context of this study, entailed both deductive and inductive coding analyses. I start by explaining the five steps adapted from Taylor-Powell (2003), which guided the study's data analysis. These steps are discussed in turn below.

### **3.7.1 Reading for overall understanding**

Reading for overall understanding is an important step in the analysis of data. I had all interviews and focus group discussions professionally transcribed. This resulted in 714 double-spaced pages of analysable texts, broken down as follows;

- 99 pages from focus groups with bystanders
- 314 pages from interviews with HR practitioners
- 301 pages from interviews with targets of bullying.

After the interviews were transcribed I went through each to check for accuracy and replaced all respondents' titles and names of organisations which could be traceable to source with pseudonyms. Thereafter, I reviewed each interview to understand its meaning, which resulted in my becoming more familiar with the data collected.

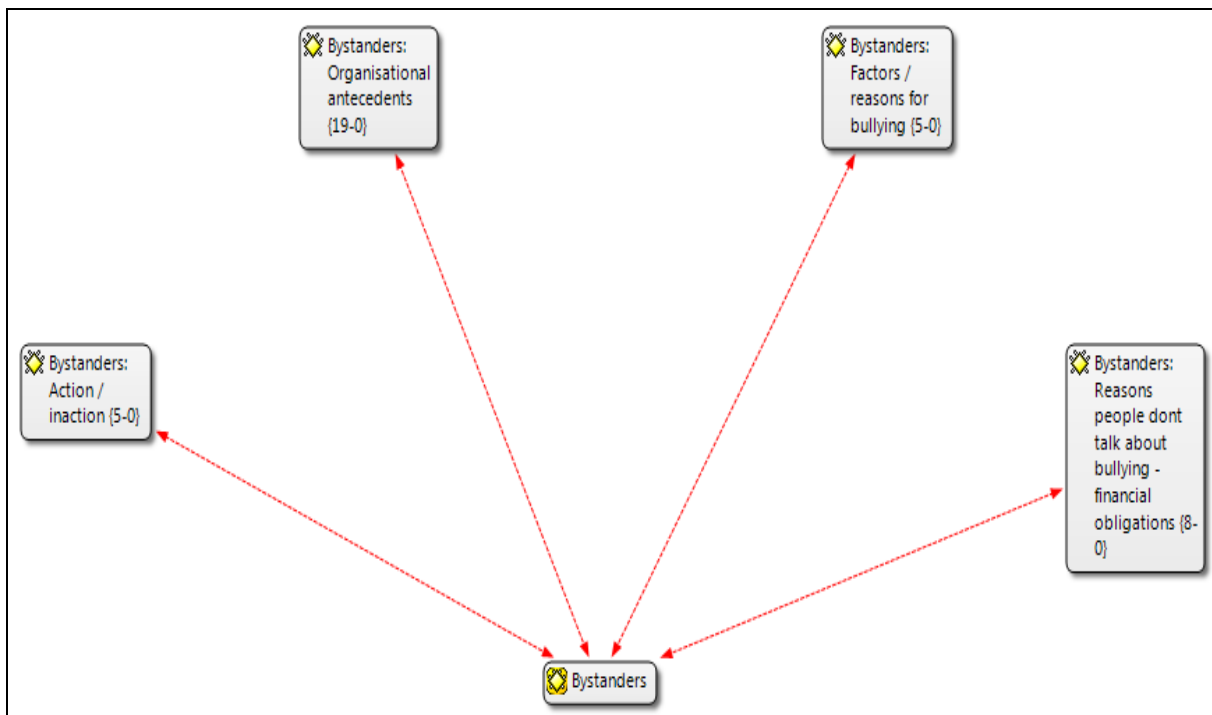
### **3.7.2 Focussing the analysis**

The initial step I took towards focussing the analysis was by reviewing the study's objectives and questions the study sought to answer. There are various ways of focussing any qualitative study's analysis, two of which are suggested by Taylor-Powell and Renner (2003). First, focussing can be by topic, question, time period, or event.

This looks at and reviews how participants have responded to particular questions over time. For example, if research questions are the units of analysis, the researcher would group together answers to specific questions. In this study, I grouped answers from targets of bullying, HR professionals and bystanders respectively. Figure 3-2 (below) is an example of grouped responses by bystanders.

I used *Atlas.ti 7.0* for data analysis, which included grouping and coding of responses by the participants. The advantages of using a computer-aided qualitative data analysis' (CAQDSA) method, *Atlas.ti* in particular, are numerous. First, *Atlas.ti* afforded me different ways to code data, organise codes, memos and research related documents, and folders. Second, it helped me to create families, that is, subgroups of documents or codes. Third, I was able to create outputs from the coded data and text. Lastly, it enabled me to create network diagrams to display relationships as depicted by Figures 3-5 and 3-6 (Archer, 2012).

**Figure 3-5: Bystanders' grouped responses**



In the example above, the bystanders' responses were grouped into four categories, namely, (i) reasons for their action or inaction against the bullying they witnessed; (ii) what bystanders consider to be organisational factors which contribute to, and make bullying likely (organisational antecedents); (iii) factors and/or reasons which bystanders believe led to the bullying; and (iv) what bystanders consider to be the reasons people do not talk about bullying at work. The number shown in each grouped category illustrates the number of times the same or similar answer was provided.

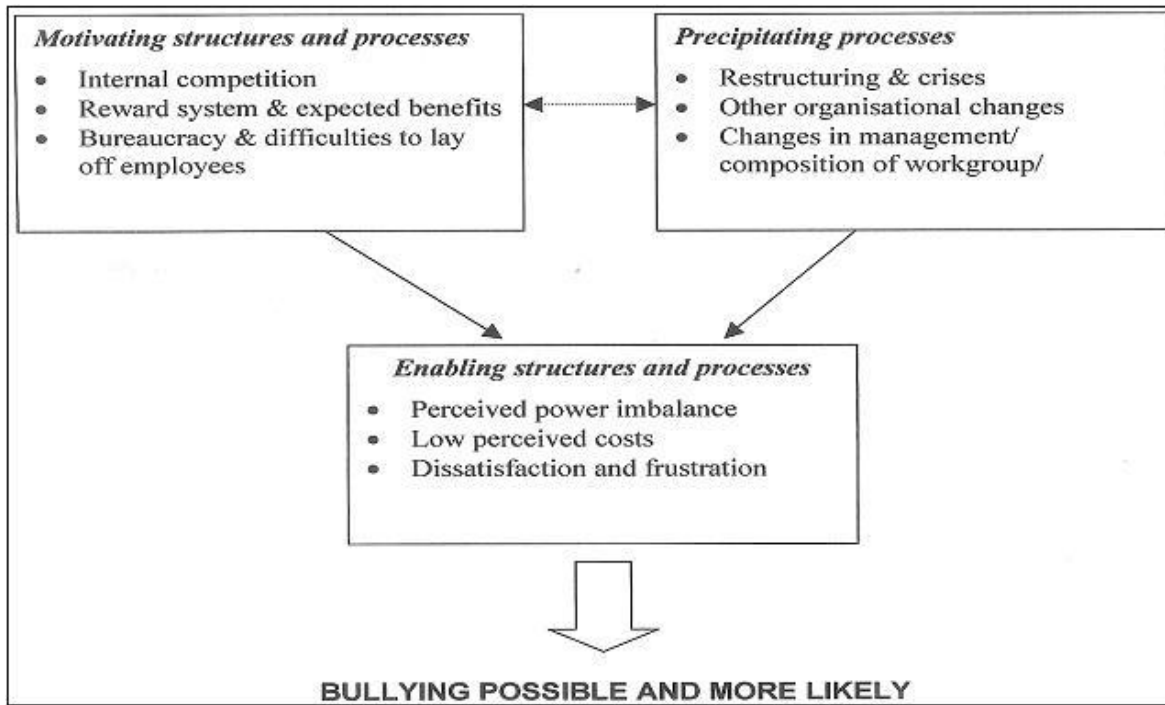
Another way the analysis can be focussed is by case or individual. The fluid nature of this study dictated that I combine the two approaches during data analysis. This is not surprising since analysis of qualitative data is cyclical, not linear.

### 3.7.3 Coding

This step is also known as 'categorising data', which in qualitative research entails identifying themes and patterns from participants' responses. The themes or patterns identified included either phrases participants used in response to questions, or categories that helped to bring meaning to the collected data. Categorising the data led to more identification of themes, some of which served as sub-categories. I continued identifying and building categories and sub-categories until no new themes, categories and/or sub-categories emerged.

Two approaches formed the basis for categorising this study's data. First, I used the study's conceptual framework developed by Salin (2003b) as an organising framework for the codes. Using this method, commonly known as *deductive approach* to coding (Thomas, 2006), I defined the structure of the initial codes in line with those defined by Salin (2003b) in Figure 3-6 (below).

Figure 3-6: Conceptual framework for the study



Source: Salin, 2003:1214

The pre-set categories which consisted of pre-determined themes and sub-categories depicted in Figure 3-6 were used to determine what the study primarily wanted to know more about, namely, perceptions and organisational antecedents of workplace bullying, within the context of South Africa. For example, *enabling structures and processes* were used as a pre-set code, and *perceived power imbalance*, *low perceived costs*, and *dissatisfaction* were used as pre-set sub-categories. Pre-determined codes and sub-categories provided parameters and the direction of what to look for in the analysis of data, as well as a filter through which I was able to test whether the data being analysed was consistent with prior assumptions put forward by Salin's conceptual framework. I used the *Atlas.ti 7.0* coding software to organise data that matched the pre-set codes and sub-categories from the study's conceptual framework. The software also helped me to systematically organise emerging codes which fell outside the study's pre-set codes.

Next, I identified and coded emergent categories. Unlike the pre-set coding approach, whereby themes and sub-categories were set before the analysis of the data, emergent categories were identified during and after the data was analysed. This approach is often called *inductive analysis* (Thomas, 2006), which entails reading large amounts of raw data to derive meaning from them. For example, I used *Atlas.ti 7.0* to organise and label data from interviews associated with the study's Research Questions 1 (RQ1), 2 (RQ2), 3 (RQ3) and 4 (RQ4), namely, how targets, bystanders and HR professionals perceived and defined workplace bullying; how workplace bullying differed from other acts of negative acts at work such as sexual harassment and racial discrimination; factors which informed the targets' perceptions of and feelings of why they believe they were targeted; and organisational antecedents to bullying. With these questions and the study's conceptual framework in mind, I read through the transcripts and my field notes, identifying themes related to these questions. Working with emergent categories was an iterative process. New categories outside of the study's conceptual framework emerged as I continued to read and re-read transcribed interviews and initial codes associated with the data from the transcripts.

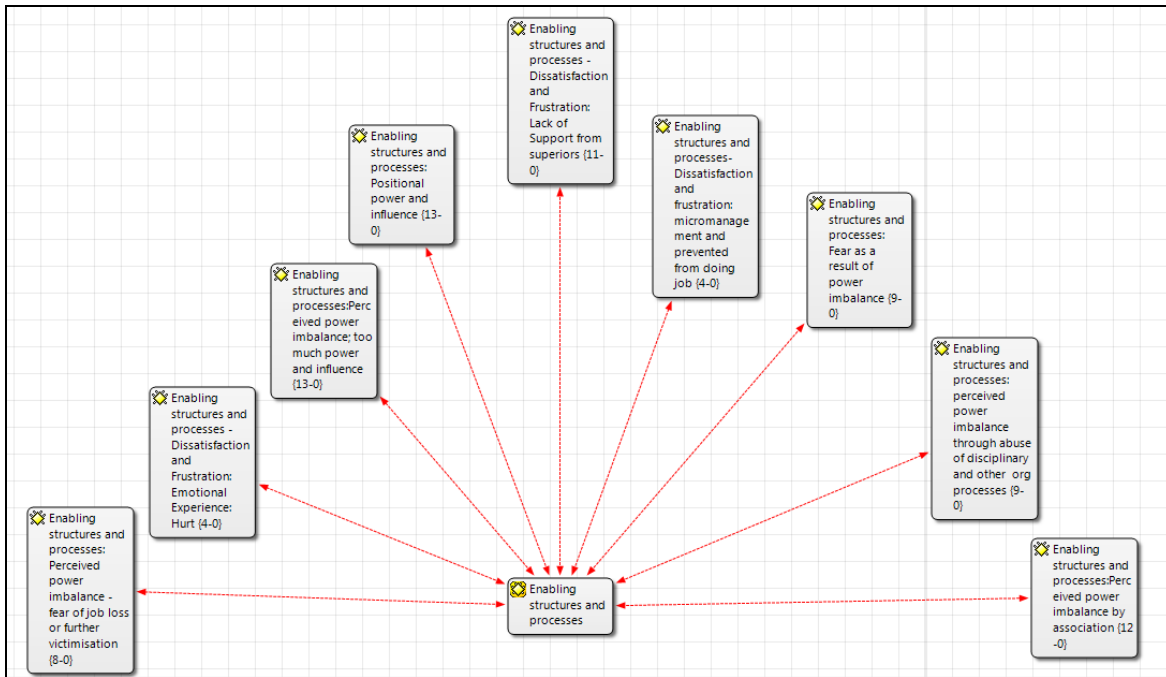
With RQ1 in mind, I labelled all the behaviours targets of bullying and HR professionals described as "bullying tactics" and /or the "nature of bullying". This process generated 68 sub-categories which I labelled "*bullying tactics*" and 112 sub-categories which I labelled "*nature of bullying*". At first, the relationships between and among the generated codes were not apparent. I used *Atlas.ti 7.0* to help me identify the similarities, differences or relationships among these codes. I then generated and printed reports of all the new codes I identified and reviewed them in search of similarities, differences or relationships. Codes such as "in the name of performance", "my way or the highway", "manipulation and backstabbing", all looked unrelated at first glance. However, when I went to review quotes relating to these codes it became apparent that the respondents were all talking about tactics used to bully others, hence the code *bullying tactics*. I followed the same process for making meaning out of *different* codes such as "being excluded and/or marginalised", "belittle, demean, undermine", "emotional outburst; shouting, anger", "moving goalpost; blaming; not

taking responsibility”, and “value of work reduced”. As was the case before, at first these codes looked different and unrelated. However, upon reviewing the quotes and texts associated with the codes it became apparent that the respondents were talking about what they considered to be the nature of bullying. Therefore, these codes were grouped under a category labelled *nature of bullying*.

I repeated the same coding process for RQs 2 - 4. After reading all the printed reports associated with RQ2, I placed all newly generated codes into five general categories associated with how targets of bullying, bystanders and HR professionals made sense of bullying situations at work. The categories related to “difficulty in naming or proving bullying”, “bullying as a form of harassment”, “bullying by other names”, “association with school bullying”, and “intentionality”. Re-reading all the quotes associated with these codes pointed to one key message; bullying is a new and complex phenomenon in South Africa which is prone to different interpretations. I first labelled the category into an all-encompassing “*bullying: it’s complicated*” main theme. Upon further analysis, I renamed the theme “*bullying by other names*” after my analysis revealed that different people preferred other terms to the term bullying. This is covered in chapter 4.

While the deductive coding approach sought to define themes and sub-categories for parts of the data analysis, and the inductive coding approach allowed codes to emerge from frequent themes derived from raw data, in this study, I combined the two approaches. For example, in the case of *enabling structures and processes*, I started the analysis with pre-set categories (deductive), but later data dictated that I change the analysis process to incorporate emerging categories (inductive). Figure 3-7 (below) is an example of a data analysis process which combined both deductive and inductive approaches to data analysis.

Figure 3-7: Integrated approach to data analysis



The study’s conceptual framework has *enabling structures and processes* as the main category, and *perceived power imbalance; low perceived costs, and dissatisfaction and frustration* as sub-categories. By combining the deductive and inductive coding processes, as depicted in Figure 3-7 (above), I was able to expand on *perceived power imbalance* and *dissatisfaction and frustration* sub-categories by providing specific examples of what targets, bystanders and HR professionals make sense of Salin’s (2003b) *perceived power imbalance* and *dissatisfaction and frustration* sub-categories. For example, in the eyes of the study’s participants, “too much power and influence”, “fear of job loss and further victimisation”, “positional power and influence”, and “abuse of disciplinary and other organisational processes”, were a function of perceived power imbalance. Similarly, “lack of support from superiors”, “micro-management and being prevented from doing own job”, and “emotional hurt” are examples of what caused the targets and HR professionals dissatisfaction and frustration.

Most qualitative studies use inductive reasoning processes to draw inferences and make meaning from the data. Differentiating inductive reasoning from deductive



reasoning is important for determining what counts as qualitative research. Typically, in an inductive inquiry, data is used to generate hypotheses, and in deductive reasoning the data is used to confirm or refute prior formulated ideas. However, in practice, many qualitative studies use both inductive and deductive coding (Creswell, 2002). Table 3-5 (below) summarises how I combined the two approaches.

**Table 3-5: Combined deductive and inductive analysis coding procedure**

Initial reading of transcribed interviews and other text data	Identified specific text related to study's conceptual framework and objectives	Labelled segments of text to create codes	Reduced overlap and redundancy among codes	Created code families to incorporate most important themes
714 pages of text	Pre-coding of segments of text	Initial codes = 94	Third cycle of coding = 62 codes	Final number of family codes = 18

Source: Adapted from Creswell (2002)

As shown in Table 3-5 (above), the transcribed interviews resulted in 714 double spaced pages of text. Starting with deductive analysis, I analysed and coded data which either corroborated or disputed the study's conceptual framework (Thomas, 2006). At the same time, I also used the inductive analysis lens during the detailed reading of the 714 pages of raw data generated from interviews as a filter through which to identify new categories which were different from the study's pre-set categories. Initially, this deductive-inductive process generated 94 codes. Subsequent coding processes reduced the initial 94 codes to 83, then to 62. Thereafter, using the *Atlas.ti 7.0* software package, I developed larger themes which were identified during the deductive and inductive coding process. This resulted in 18 main themes.

### 3.7.4 Thematic analysis

A theme in qualitative research is the outcome of the coding process and analytic reflection (Saldaña, 2013). Thematic analysis is a process of identifying patterns and connections, as well as relationships between the categories which emanated from the coding process. Thematic analysis is thus useful for summarising the data which often leads to the identification of categories of relative importance or two or more categories which appear to be connected, or have a relationship (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). The relative importance of a theme or category is inferred from a number of times the theme surfaces from the participants' responses. The connection between themes or categories is recognisable when two or more themes tend to consistently appear together, that is, whenever the one theme appears a specific theme also appears. According to Taylor-Powell and Renner (2003), it is important to look out for recurring themes which connect when analysing data because they explain why something occurs. Similarly, it is equally important to look for themes which counter or contradict pre-set categories.

Data analysis and the identification of themes in qualitative studies are generally guided by the study's objectives and overall research questions (Thomas, 2006). I therefore used thematic analysis to gain a better understanding of the following:

- How workplace bullying is perceived by targets, HR professionals and bystanders (RQ1);
- How workplace bullying is perceived relative to other forms of negative acts at work (RQ2);
- Factors which targets perceive to have led to the bullying (RQ3);
- Organisational antecedents of workplace bullying (RQ4).

I found thematic analysis to be the most appropriate tool to use to identify patterns and connections, as well as identify areas that either corroborated or appeared to contradict or refute this study's conceptual framework by Salin (2003b). Once again, to identify

larger themes, I re-read all data with specific focus on the 18 codes which I had identified through the second cycle coding process. I then re-coded the data based on new data and themes which emerged. According to Saldaña (2013: 206), “data are not coded, they are *recoded*”.

I uncovered three main features during this more focussed reading. First, with regards to the study’s conceptual model I was able to identify which parts of the model were 100% applicable in the South African context and which were not. For example, all Salin’s (2003b) codes and /or categories which made bullying likely under the theme *precipitating processes* were found to be applicable even in the South African workplace. However, this was not the case with other themes, namely *motivating structures and processes*; and *enabling structures and processes*. Second, I added new South Africa-specific codes to Salin’s conceptual framework themes in which a 100% match with the framework’s codes or categories was not found. Lastly, I uncovered two new themes which were completely different from the study’s conceptual framework’s themes. I labelled these “social identity” and “workplace – society eco-system”. With further iterations, I incorporated the “workplace-society eco-system” into the broader “social identity” theme. The findings of these two themes will be discussed in detail in chapter 6.

### **3.7.5 Credibility and trustworthiness of analysis and findings**

The audience, intended research purpose, diverse philosophical and theoretical orientations, as well as approaches to qualitative research, contribute to issues of quality and credibility (Patton, 1999). Debates about the ‘validity’ and ‘reliability’ in qualitative research intensified during what Denzin and Lincoln (1985) called the blurred genres (1970s to mid-1980s) phase of the “moments” of qualitative research. During this period, debates focussed on the objectivity of the qualitative researcher’s representation of the social reality constructed by the respondents. Denzin and Lincoln (1985) argued that during the blurred genres phase of research, established

approaches to the study of social sciences which tended to emphasise functional, positivist and behavioural views, were replaced by more interpretive, open-ended standpoints. At the same time, the credibility and trustworthiness of the interpretive nature of research was questioned.

Trustworthiness of qualitative research findings revolve around issues of credibility, transferability, and dependability, or, with the representation of the “other” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1985). Credibility refers to concerns about the correct representation of the respondents’ constructed social realities shared during the research. Transferability refers to the extent to which the qualitative researcher’s results could be transferred, or applied in another context. Dependability refers to the acceptance of the qualitative research findings as credible.

Patton (1999:1190) suggests that credibility in qualitative research depends on three distinct but inquiry related elements, namely, the rigour of data collection and data analysis techniques and methods, the credibility of the researcher, and the philosophical belief in the value of the inquiry. Debate and controversy with respect to the rigour of techniques and methods applied in qualitative research revolve around the nature of the analysis. Unlike quantitative analysis, which follows set formulae and rules, the integrity of the analysis in qualitative research is often tied to the capability of the researcher.

There is yet to be total agreement regarding the criteria for good qualitative research, therefore there is no clear or universal solution to the question of quality, credibility and trustworthiness in qualitative research. However, many researchers agree that credibility and trustworthiness lies in the conflicting expectation of being both rigorous and flexible (Flick, 2007). In quantitative research, validity refers to a valid instrument, which measures what the study claims to measure. In qualitative research, a study is valid if it examines the topic and/or phenomenon it claims to have examined (King, 1994). The difference in measuring a study’s validity between a quantitative and qualitative study is that, in quantitative research, it centres on methods, whereas in qualitative research it centres on interpretations.

I applied Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, and dependability to determine the trustworthiness of my study. This I did through member checking and what Saldaña (2013:206) calls, "shop talking" through the study. Member checking is a qualitative research technique used to check the accuracy of what has been recorded from the interviews, and accommodates the emergent nature of qualitative research. According to Saldaña (2013:206), "shop talking" through the study entails regularly talking with peers, advisors, colleagues about one's study and data analysis. Doing so often provides the researcher with a different perspective and insights which a researcher who is immersed in his/her study may miss.

To establish the credibility of my analysis of the interviews, I approached all nine HR professionals and 12 targets I interviewed by e-mail, and asked them to provide me with feedback regarding whether the transcribed interviews are a true representation of our conversation, and whether they agreed with the themes I ascribed to parts of the interviews. Before sending participants their individual transcribed interviews, I e-mailed them a message (below), which explained and provided the context of my request. This pre-member checking message also served to indirectly check whether the participants were still interested in serving as member checks. At the end of each interview during the data collection phase, I asked each participant whether they would be willing to serve as member checks. They all agreed to serve as member checks. Below is the initial message which was sent to all participants of my study;

*"I trust this e-mail finds you well and would like to once again thank you very much for participating in my PhD study. I am now at a stage where I need to validate the content and outcome of your interviews. This process is commonly referred to as member checking. Member checking is a qualitative research technique used to check the accuracy of what has been recorded from the interviews, and accommodates any changes the research participants may want made, should they feel their points were not captured accurately.*

*I am in the process of finalising coding, re-coding and clustering data from the interviews and expect to send each one of you his/her interview transcript with*

*codes applied next to data from the interviews in the next day or two. I will also send you my study's conceptual framework which explains some of the codes I used. The rest of the codes emerged from further analysis of the data.*

*When you receive your interview transcript, please read through it and do a few last things for me. First, confirm if what has been transcribed is captured accurately; second, see if you agree with the codes I allocated next to data from your interview; and lastly, send me back your comments and/or recommended amendments should you have any, at your earliest convenient time.*

*Once again, thank you and until then, keep well”.*

Two days later, I sent all the participants copies of their respective interviews, together with ascribed codes. Five of the nine HR professionals and seven of the twelve targets responded within a week of receiving their transcribed interviews and either confirmed that the interviews were a true reflection of our conversation, and/or amended some content which they felt had not been accurately captured. The participants did not raise any queries about the ascribed codes, and I took that as confirmation of their agreement with the codes. A few of the participants reiterated their wish to see the study's findings as well.

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), a final member check towards the end of the study is one way of testing the correctness of the overall interpretation of the study's findings. However, Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that member checks are more difficult to conduct near the end of the study and therefore caution researchers to select participants for final member checks carefully. Otherwise, they assert that member checks during the initial phase of the study may suffice if coupled with other credibility strategies. With this in mind, I used several strategies to enhance the credibility of this study. These were triangulation, peer examination, and the study's interviewing process. I triangulated the data from interviews with targets, HR professionals and bystanders, assessment of them against each other, and cross-checking of their interpretation for consistencies or differences. Towards the end of the study, I also

interviewed three Wellness / EAP professionals to corroborate the findings by HR professionals. Triangulation contributed to the holistic manner with which the bullying phenomenon was studied and addressed.

Another strategy I used to enhance the study's credibility was through peer examination (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), also known as 'peer review', based on the same principles as member checks but involving discussion of one's research with an impartial third party who has experience of using qualitative methods. I discussed my research design, research execution and insights with someone who is an expert in qualitative methods, specifically, computer-aided qualitative data analysis (CAQDSA) *Atlas.ti*. Having peer examination de-briefing sessions with this expert presented me with a great opportunity to discuss and elicit constructive feedback regarding the meaning I was making with regards to the rigour around the analysis of my data. Similarly, the peer examiner's questions and review 'kept me honest' about my data analysis process and the meaning I was making out of those analysed data. I also shared some of the transcribed interviews, verbatim quotes, the coding and interpretations I made with the expert for critical assessment of the interpretations I made.

An independent academic qualitative data analysis expert also reviewed the coding of the interviews and focus group transcripts. The expert reviewed the coding steps, the codes, their meanings and how they had been applied to the transcripts. Additionally, the expert reviewed the code families and how I moved from first level coding to second order coding and ultimately to the main themes in the data. The independent reviewer discussed and provided verbal feedback on the coding, analysis and interpretation of the themes. Any differences were resolved. The independent review resulted in an acceptable level of agreement with the way in which the data had been coded and analysed using Salin's (2003b) conceptual framework as the initial framework.

Lastly, the credibility of this study was enhanced through the way I executed the interviewing process. For example, during the pilot study I reframed, reviewed, removed and/or added new questions as necessary, before undertaking the full study. During the execution of the study, credibility was enhanced through the consistent manner in which

I asked questions about participants' own bullying experiences, and was further enhanced by asking the study respondents if they knew of anyone who had similar experiences. According to Krefting (1991), asking research respondents if they knew anyone with the same experiences of the phenomenon studied is useful in verifying observations and interpretations.

The second criterion I used to establish the trustworthiness of this study is transferability, that is, the extent to which the findings of a particular study can be applied and/or transferred to other situations (Merriam, 1998). That most qualitative studies are specific to particular locations and tend to have small samples, have raised questions about whether their findings can be applied to other situations. However, Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that the responsibility of the transferability of qualitative research findings lies with the researcher's ability to provide sufficient contextual information of the fieldwork sites to enable others to make a transfer to their own situations. With this in mind, from the pilot study through the execution of the full study, I provided detailed descriptions of the two industries in which the study was based; specific restrictions of the type of people who were called to participate in the study; the number of people interviewed per category of participants, i.e. targets, HR professionals and bystanders; as well as the data collection methods that were employed with a view to enabling the reader to transfer the findings to different situations.

According to Shenton (2004:70), "...the results of a qualitative study must be understood within the context of the particular characteristics of the organisation or organisations and, perhaps, geographical area in which the fieldwork was carried out". I provided descriptions of the industries and geographical and contextual settings in which my study was carried out, as well as provided further descriptions of categories by targets, HR professionals and bystanders which emerged from the analysis. Furthermore, I also provided detailed descriptions of the study's data analysis processes and credibility strategies I applied to arrive at the study's findings.

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) last criterion in establishing trustworthiness is dependability, which relates to the consistency of findings and the clarity with which a researcher is



able to describe the situation to the extent that another researcher can clearly follow the trail of decisions made by the researcher in the study. I enhanced the dependability of this study by providing a description of the integrated approach to data analysis (deductive-inductive coding) I followed. Another way I increased dependability of the findings was through triangulation of data from different data collection methods. The utilisation of different data collection methods ensures that the weakness of one method is compensated by other methods (Krefting, 1991). I also ensured dependability through member checks for accuracy of data credibility and peer examination. Using a peer examiner who is a methodological expert in CAQDAS, *ATLAS.ti 7.0* in particular, enhanced the dependability of the findings by checking the study's research plan and implementation, as well as data analysis. Chapters 4 to 6 discuss the findings of the research.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS: HOW HR PROFESSIONALS AND TARGETS PERCEIVE AND DEFINE WORKPLACE BULLYING

#### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

Salin's (2003b) framework was used during the data analysis process to better understand the logic behind bullying, detailed in chapter 3. The interviews generated voluminous data concerning how HR professionals, targets and bystanders perceive and define workplace bullying, as well as what they perceive to be organisational antecedents of bullying. Thus, the findings of the research are reported in three sequential chapters. This chapter reports how HR professionals and targets define and understand the concept of workplace bullying. The chapter also includes the findings from interviews with Wellness / EAP professionals who were included towards the end of the study, as part of the HR professionals' sample. I also discuss how HR professionals make sense of their role in bullying situations. Chapter 5 will focus on how bystanders make sense of workplace bullying and their role in bullying situations, and chapter 6 on what the HR professionals, targets and bystanders consider to be organisational antecedents of workplace bullying using the study's conceptual framework as a lens. Additionally, the chapter describes the factors which targets believed to be the reasons they were targeted.

The first research question asked how HR professionals, targets and bystanders perceive and define workplace bullying. The second research question asked the study participants how workplace bullying differs from other acts of negative acts at work, such as sexual harassment or racial discrimination. The third research question asked targets about factors which influenced their perceptions of, and feelings about being targeted. The three research questions are interrelated and it makes sense to discuss them together. In this chapter, I focus on the HR professionals and targets' findings, because the behaviours they perceived and defined as bullying paralleled those defined

by bystanders. The findings specific to how bystanders make sense of bullying and their role in bullying situations will be the focus of chapter 5.

I first discuss bullying from the HR professionals' perspective. Second, I provide an overview of several targets' bullying experiences to put the HR professionals and targets' perceptions and definition of workplace bullying into context. I end the chapter by discussing participants' views regarding how workplace bullying differs from other negative acts at work, such as harassment and discrimination.

## 4.2 BULLYING FROM AN HR PERSPECTIVE

My analysis of the interviews revealed differing views regarding how HR professionals understood workplace bullying. For example, the views provided by the first two interviews with two HR Group Managers in a large manufacturing industry were indicative of what was heard from subsequent interviewees. First, there was surprise that anyone would associate bullying with the workplace, let alone want to research it. Bullying was viewed as “a school thing”. Second, the HR professionals also struggled with differentiating workplace bullying from other negative acts at work, such as harassment or discrimination. Quotes from the Group HR Professionals in a large manufacturing industry reflect these perceptions;

*When my colleague informed me of your research and asked me whether I wanted to speak with you, I thought to myself, but this is not high school or preparatory school. My son is at pre-school and they talk about bullying; bullying has always been a term used at school. I have never really thought about it in a work environment, but as I am speaking to you now, I am thinking, “oh my..., this is happening and we are not focussing on this because we don't think of bullying in the workplace”.*

Quotes from two Senior HR Professionals in the financial services sector echoed the earlier perceptions by Group HR Professionals from the manufacturing industry;

*To start off, I battle with the difference between bullying and harassment. “When does it become bullying; and when has it moved from harassment or racism to becoming bullying?” Maybe it is because we have not yet identified and defined it*

*as bullying in the workplace. We still think bullying happens in schools. I don't know if there is bullying. Maybe there is, maybe there is not. I don't know.*

Further analysis revealed that even though other HR professionals believed that bullying did exist in their organisations, statements such as “*maybe it is bullying, maybe it is not*”, or “*...but I believe it is bullying at the end of the day*”, were not uncommon. Similarly, most HR professionals saw workplace bullying as being part of harassment, while others felt that there was a difference between it and other negative acts at work, such as harassment and racial or gender discrimination. These perspectives helped shed light on the second research question.

Although a number of themes emerged from the interviews with HR professionals, the most prevalent were those that involved behaviours which described the nature of bullying, tactics, and organisational factors which made it possible for it to occur. Many of the behaviours HR professionals described as bullying either associated with the nature of bullying or tactics, and factors which contributed to it paralleled those described by targets and bystanders. These will be discussed in detail in sections 5.4 and 5.5 of this chapter. In addition to the aforementioned themes, my analysis revealed two more themes which were specific to HR professionals. These were (i) Bullying from a Wellness / EAP perspective (ii) HR professionals as targets; and (iii) the role of HR in bullying situations. HR explained their role within the context of policies and procedures, and employee services provided by HR. Many HR professionals perceived these services to be their organisations' support to employees who encounter abuse at work. I detail each of these themes below.

#### **4.2.1 Bullying from a Wellness / EAP perspective**

According to the EAP professionals I interviewed, EAP interventions in their organisations provide support to employees and their family members around a broad range of matters such as organisational relationship issues, stress, anxiety, etc. Specifically, they reported their services to encompass psycho-social support,

occupational health management, risk management, and sickness support. The Wellness / EAP professionals' findings are similar to the findings by HR professionals with regards to what they perceive to be organisational antecedents of workplace bullying. All three Wellness / EAP professionals perceived organisational restructuring, other organisational changes, such as changes aimed at addressing the impact of the declining economic environment on the organisation, as well as hierarchical corporate structures to be precipitating factors for bullying. Additionally, the EAP professionals perceived power imbalance emanating from positional authority from positions people occupy in the hierarchy, to be precipitating factors for bullying. An EAP professional explained this well when he described his organisation's culture as being 'characterised by the use of positional power to get things done'. According to the participant,

*The problem is specialists are put into managerial and leadership positions and they do not know how to manage or lead. Also, many get promoted into these positions due to tenure, as opposed to their managerial or leadership capabilities. They therefore use their positional power to get things done, and this result in bullying.*

The above sentiment was shared by all EAP professionals interviewed. Even though the EAP professionals believed that bullying does exist in their organisations, they nonetheless confirmed that employees who use their services do not use the term 'bullying' to describe their experiences. According to them, bullying is hidden under terms like 'relationship issues' and 'stress'.

Lastly, the way EAP professionals defined what they considered to be behaviour associated with bullying, the same way that HR professionals and targets defined bullying.

#### **4.2.2 HR professionals as targets**

Most bullying literature classifies parties involved in workplace bullying into three categories, namely, the victim or target, the bully or perpetrator and the witness or bystander, and typically study bullying as a "victim-centred" phenomenon. An assumption made in designing the present study was to include HR professionals as

neither targets nor perpetrators, but as a means of gaining an understanding of the bullying phenomenon from those who might be responsible for managing bullying in the workplace. Moreover, as will be shown in this chapter, not all targets of bullying see themselves as victims, and thus describe their situation by terms other than “bullying”. My analyses showed that HR professionals are typically considered to be either “with management” or “with the employees”. However, out of nine HR professionals interviewed, four also saw themselves as targets. The words of the HR professional sums up what was generally expressed by others:

*The bullying that I and my colleagues are experiencing is a function of our decentralised business model. Because we are in a service area, the decentralised HR divisions see us as service providers who must answer to all their whims at a drop of the hat! They kick and scream if they don't get what they want, when they want, and they feel their behaviour is warranted because they are our “clients”. They actually talk down on us and it is a matter of anything that we do is perceived as not adding value to the business units. So, personally, I am experiencing bullying from a couple of businesses in terms of how they act and react to us. The main issue is that they see us as service providers and they therefore expect us to provide a service, irrespective of whether their requests are unrealistic within the context of all the other priorities we may already have.*

Similarly, other HR professionals saw some of their colleagues in HR as perpetrators. An HR professional commented, “*the sad part is bullying is happening within HR*”. An HR target explained the circumstances which she believed led to her bullying;

*The bully was my direct manager. I think he had a lot of insecurities in himself and felt threatened by the staff under him because he was not that competent. I also think, by performing and doing our jobs well, we were unintentionally showing him up all the time, and so his bullying took the form of micro managing, interfering in whatever I was doing, and undermining me in front of my colleagues and other managers I was working with. This was continual. He did this repeatedly. He wanted me to run everything by him and then he would pick holes in everything I did.*

Many HR professionals also felt that the lack of awareness and consistent understanding of bullying as a workplace issue contributed to differing views around the role of HR professionals in bullying situations.

### 4.2.3 The role of HR in bullying situations

As shown in the preceding section, bullying is not readily identified as something that happens in the workplace. To a large extent, it is still largely associated with, and therefore classified as a “school problem”. Many HR professionals only began to identify some prevailing organisational behaviours, structures and processes as bullying, upon talking about workplace bullying within the context of the study’s operational definition. Similarly, employees and HR professionals viewed the role of HR in bullying situations differently. Several employees viewed HR as being on management’s side. A target commented:

*Senior managers interact with HR more, so they get to be buddies. So when you come with your little story about how not nicely you were treated, we are often dismissed as being cry-babies and no one ever gets disciplined.*

HR professionals, on the other hand, perceived their role in bullying situations as protecting the employee, particularly in cases when the perpetrator was the employee’s line manager. An HR professional commented:

*Our role is to probe to understand all sides of the issue at hand. At the same time, it is about trying to protect the victim. We do this by first asking the employee whether they want to remain anonymous or whether they want to come open, understanding that sometimes if the complaint involves one’s manager, it is difficult for the people reporting to this manager to complain openly to us..., so the first idea is to protect the victim.*

All the HR professionals confirmed that none of their organisations had a specific policy on bullying. This they attributed to the fact that bullying was new and not well known, or used concept in organisations, unlike harassment, for example. According to HR professionals, every employee in any organisation knows what harassment is and knows what to do if harassed. The same cannot be said of workplace bullying. However, by the end of the interviews, all HR professionals felt that their organisations’ current HR policies and procedures were sufficient to guide how they could handle bullying should someone report being bullied.

#### **4.2.3.1 Policies and procedures which guide HR professionals**

All HR professionals confirmed having policies and procedures which clearly articulated steps employees could follow in events of abuse at work. The most common policies found in all the participating HR professionals' organisations were: (i) the Harassment policy; (ii) Policy and guidelines on Discipline, commonly known as the Grievance Policy / Procedure; (iii) the Employment Equity Policy / Framework; and (iv) the Performance Management Policy. All these policies and procedures are governed by, and based on the Labour Relations Act, 66 of 1995. The primary objective of the Labour Relations Act is to provide guidelines which regulate and promote fairness, democracy, and employee participation in decision-making through the establishment of workplace forums and trade unions where applicable. Furthermore, the Labour Relations Act gives effect to the Bill of Rights of the South African Constitution.

A majority of the HR professionals interviewed saw their primary role as preventing any abuse and unfairness at work, one way being developing and implementing policy awareness interventions. An HR professional explained:

*We communicate the policy on sexual harassment to ensure that employees are aware of the policy's existence and that they know what to do should they find themselves in harassment situations. For example, we introduce and discuss our policies to new recruits during induction programmes. Secondly, all the policies are placed on our intranet sites for employees to have access to them as and when they need to. In the event that there is something in the policy employees do not understand, they can come to HR to seek clarity. We also communicate all the policy changes and amendments to the employees.*

Other HR professionals confirmed following the same or similar practice to the one described above. However, some HR professionals believed that knowing and understanding the policies and procedures was useless if the procedures were not followed. A few acknowledged that both employees and management did not always follow the policies' procedures. An HR professional commented:

*To give you a sense of how the manufacturing company operates, our performance management process has grievance policy addendums which*



*are linked to the Employee Relations Act. We try to be fair and transparent, you know, but the practices are very different. What happens in reality is not always aligned to the policies' procedures.*

Several HR professionals from both the financial services and manufacturing industries indicated that their organisations' grievance policy guidelines and procedures tended to cover all negative acts at work. Furthermore, two of the financial services organisations that participated in the study reported having an ethics office and related procedures, in addition to the commonly known and used HR processes and procedures. The ethics office does not replace HR processes and procedures but provides an alternative avenue for employees who, for various reasons, either do not trust HR or do not feel comfortable lodging the grievance with HR. The participant from the ethics office explained,

*Our harassment policy stipulates that an employee lays a grievance against the person accused of harassment. Where an employee does not trust HR or management, they are allowed to come directly to the ethics office. Or, where a grievance outcome is not satisfactory, it is often referred to the ethics office for further investigating.*

An officer in the ethics office explained how it complimented the HR processes and procedures:

*The first thing that I would establish is ask them whether they had followed the normal HR process, that is, whether they had lodged a grievance. If they say yes I would ask what happened in that grievance. And they would typically say to me, "HR is on management's side". This is the problem. HR is not seen as independent and objective, and this is not just in my organisation, this is an industry-wide problem. To get back to our conversation, if they said yes they had lodged a grievance, and then I would ask, "So why are you here?" Then it would invariably be that they were not happy with the outcome of the grievance. Then we would interrogate why it was not satisfactory and establish if there is merit and substance to take the investigation further. If merit for further investigation was found, we would interview all the parties involved, in addition to the employee. Based on the outcome of the interviews, we would decide whether the ethics office should conduct further investigations, or whether the investigation should be conducted by an external company to ensure more independence and objectivity.*

The ethics office representative commented that in some cases employees would

come straight to them because they were not aware of the HR processes. In such cases, the ethics office would then refer the employee to follow the HR route. However, in many instances employees reportedly still opted to go the ethics office route because “they don't trust management and HR” and believed that following the HR route was, in their words “not going to be a fair hearing and that is why we are coming directly to the ethics office”. Lastly, all HR professionals indicated that their organisations had “a code of conduct / code of ethics”, which defined the type of desirable behaviour from the employees.

An HR professional in the manufacturing industry reported that his organisation had a *Tip-Offs Anonymous* service, a confidential whistleblowing hotline service managed by an external, independent professional services firm which employees can use to report cases and/or raise grievances. Employees chose to use it in instances when they felt that laying a grievance openly might lead to intimidation or victimisation. The service used trained operators who were able to respond to calls in all the 11 South African official languages and any employee could call a toll-free number to report abusive or unethical behaviour. This was important in the manufacturing industry where the majority of employees are blue-collar. In unionised environments, the HR processes and procedures were replaced by the bargaining procedures.

Lastly, many HR professionals indicated that their organisations offered additional support to employees in distress as a result of negative work-related behaviour. Therefore, they did not see the need for additional policies on bullying. Examples of the type of support organisations provided are detailed in the following section.

#### **4.2.3.2 Organisational support**

Many HR professionals believed HR fulfilled the “employee champion” function. To illustrate the point, the HR professional commented, “*If somebody is going to be in a disciplinary hearing or in a grievance, we would assist them in preparing for the*

*disciplinary hearing and the grievance process*". In addition, many HR professionals mentioned that their organisations had Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs) available for use by all employees. Many organisations offered free counselling sessions to people who had been harassed or victimised. These services are coordinated through the ethics office and/or HR's Employee Wellness services. An ethics officer who worked closely with HR explained:

*We have an extensive wellness programme where employees are allowed six free counselling sessions. Where the six sessions are deemed not to be adequate, we can sanction further sessions for free, for employees to address the psychological impact of what had happened to them.*

The HR professionals and the ethics office indicated that they often facilitated the transfer of employees to other positions in different divisions in instances where the abuse was of a serious nature in that it had the greatest impact on the employee's wellbeing. In such cases, the employee would receive first preference for a transfer to other similar types of positions as his/her current position, because his/her own division is considered a hostile environment. In such cases, the HR professionals' first priority would be to take the employee out of their current situation. Moreover, the HR professionals and ethics office confirmed that cases which were considered serious to the point of removing the employee from the perpetrator often involved disciplinary hearings, and instances in which the professionals deemed it desirable to shield the employee from potential further victimisation or intimidation.

The HR professionals and ethics office often had follow-up sessions with employees who had been transferred to other divisions as a result of the abuse, to establish how they were coping in their new environment, as well as to ascertain whether the EAP intervention was helping. Where necessary, the ethics office and/or HR would make recommendations for further support if needed. In large manufacturing plants or factories, the EAP support was reported to be through occupational health practitioners, because people found it more acceptable to say "I am going to see a nurse" than "I am going to see a psychologist". According to an HR professional in manufacturing, the majority of the employees in manufacturing plants or factory

environments were blue collar males who did not believe in therapy and/or see it as a sign of weakness. Hence, they would rather speak to a nurse. Additionally, the occupational health practitioners in the manufacturing industry were reported to be well trained and qualified, and as being attuned to the culture of the working environment.

Overall, my analysis revealed that most HR professionals and the ethics officer I spoke with believed that bullying did exist in their organisations, even though some did not initially think of the negative behaviours they reported and/or observed as bullying. Similarly, many of the targets believed that bullying existed in their organisations, though some did not like the term “bullying” and would rather describe their experiences as injustice, intimidation, victimisation or discrimination. In the next section, I provide brief scenarios of select targets’ bullying situations so that the analysis and discussion of the identified themes can be put in context. These scenarios represent what was generally heard from the targets interviewed.

### **4.3 TARGETS’ BULLYING SCENARIOS**

The scenarios described below represent a summary of data that informed the themes and key findings from interviews with targets and HR professionals. They reflect diversity in terms of position of bullies (e.g., peers, bosses), as well as race and gender of targets and bullies. Additionally, the scenarios are representative of the dominant types of bullying experiences shared by targets. While keeping the content and situations of the scenarios as close as possible to the original, some scenarios have been slightly altered to ensure that they could not be associated with, and/or traced back to any of the organisations of which the participants were members. Pseudonyms are used, and similarly, industries of employment as well as real positions where warranted, for purposes of confidentiality, are not indicated. These scenarios do not include all interviews conducted, but shed light on research questions 3 and 4, which asked targets what factors influenced their perceptions of, and feelings about being

targeted and what they believed to be the organisational antecedents of bullying, respectively.

**Mary**, a White female, who had been with her company for nine years, was bullied by someone at the same managerial level as her. The bully was also a White woman. Even though Mary and the bully were equals, the bully had more power in the sense that she was related to one of the top executives and was a member of the executives' "in-group". Mary and the bully had a clash which dated back three years, but the actual bullying started in earnest and escalated when Mary was promoted to a management position. The bully, through her connection with the top executive, undermined Mary to the executive. The bully would also openly criticise Mary or shout at her, as well as send her what Mary described as "snotty" e-mails. Generally, the bully questioned every decision and/or action Mary took and overruled her decisions.

Mary described the nature of her organisation's work environment as conflict-driven. According to her, the conflict was fuelled by the declining nature of the industry in which her organisation operated. As she put it, "*everybody is scrambling, because our turnover is not growing at the same rate as our costs*". Given this environment, according to Mary, "targets are very hard to achieve, so there is a lot of blaming going around". The blaming and conflict-driven nature of the work situation had become acceptable behaviour. Mary once resigned at the time there was a change in leadership. However, the incoming CEO changed her position and she stayed, and during the leadership change-over, after the old CEO left, Mary reportedly started forwarding all the abusive e-mail exchanges from her bully to her home e-mail address because, in her words, "*I had a funny feeling that I was going to get pushed*". She commented further, "*So I kept on forwarding some of the e-mails to my home address so that if the axe fell, I had proof of what had been going on*". Mary commented that she was not the only person who was targeted by the bully. She cited two individuals who since resigned and left the organisation after citing the bully as reasons they left. Mary described the bully as "*an octopus sitting in a corner sending out black ink which was polluting the whole tank*". She explained, "*That's how I see it. You have one person in*

*the tank and they are actually polluting everything around there*". While Mary attested to other incidences of bullying, she did acknowledge that the bullying is difficult to prove because *"it is difficult to get anyone forward to lodge complains because they are scared"*. Mary's organisation had since hired a new executive who is Mary's line manager. The new executive buffered Mary from the bullying because he was not afraid to confront the bully or *"her associates at the top"*. While Mary was no longer a target of bullying, she commented, *"I still tread on eggshells around her. With her, I back-pedal a lot quicker than I back-pedal with anybody else"*.

\* \* \* \*

**Sibongile** was a Black African woman who had recently been promoted to a senior management position after five years with the organisation. Sibongile also happened to be in HR. As was the case with Mary, the person that Sibongile identified as the bully was her peer and equal, but with very close ties to one of the organisation's top executives. The bully was a White female. Sibongile explained that she immediately noticed problems, soon after she was promoted. According to Sibongile, some of her White colleagues reduced her promotion to Affirmative Action. A few questioned her ability and competence to taking up and performing according to the requirements and standards that came with the position's responsibilities. This is despite Sibongile being more qualified than her doubting colleagues, and that she had in excess of 10 years' experience as a Subject Matter Expert in her field.

Sibongile explained that her promotion brought other experiences, in addition to the disrespect from some colleagues and the bullying from a peer who was connected to one of the top executives. First, her promotion meant that she had to take over a small team of consultants and administrators who used to report to a different manager. Sibongile described the new administrator, who happened to be a White female, as being very disrespectful and insubordinate. The new administrator often stayed away from work without letting Sibongile know. On a few occasions, Sibongile would get to hear from her White colleagues that the administrator was not going to be at work. Additionally, the administrator reportedly shared confidential manager-team member

performance review conversations with colleagues, typically fuelling the views that Sibongile was “*out of her depth*”.

Second, Sibongile did not receive any form of ‘protection’ from the head of department. She explained that she often received attacking, scathing e-mails from the bully for what she regarded as structural flaws. On more than three occasions, Sibongile reportedly brought these scathing attacks and the faulty reporting lines as a result of structural flaws to the attention of the head of department, but the response, according to Sibongile, was to call both Sibongile and the bully into her office for what Sibongile saw as a “slap on the hand” of the bully, and the behaviour would continue unabated. Moreover, this type of behaviour reportedly continued in management meetings in full view of everyone. In meetings, Sibongile commented, “*the bully and her friends would openly mock me and punch holes in everything I say or present*”. In all these cases, Sibongile explained, “*the head of department would just look on*”. Meanwhile, the bully reportedly continued to privately and publicly speak to Sibongile in a demeaning, belittling tone. She commented, “I could not believe that people can behave like this and be allowed to get away with it”. Sibongile concluded that nothing ever happened to the bully because she was the top executive’s “pet”, and the head of department was scared of the bully because of her relationship with one of the top executives. Sibongile described her bullying experiences as having had undertones of racial and jealousy because she was Black and female, and jealousy because she was more educated than her white colleagues. The head of department subsequently left, and Sibongile reported to being happy under the new head who was an African female, and that the bullying had eased off since the new appointment. However, Sibongile believed that there was still much bullying going on in the organisation.

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**Jabu** was a middle manager who had been in his current job for 11 years. For most of those 11 years, Jabu worked very well with his colleagues and superiors, until his superior, who was also the head of the organisation, left. Jabu explained that his problems began with the change in the organisation’s leadership. As often happened

with leadership changes of any organisation's highest office, new leaders tend to appoint their own trusted people to oversee the running of critical functions. Because Jabu used to work in the previous CEO's office he believed that there was an expectation that he too would leave once the term of office of the previous CEO expired.

When it became clear that he had no intention of leaving he reportedly started to feel great pressure to leave. The bullying from the newly-appointed head in the new CEO's office began in earnest. According to Jabu, the bullying was continuous and was repeated almost weekly for three years. He was steadily stripped of all decision-making powers; the hostility towards him increased; he was continuously belittled and demeaned in full view of colleagues and told how useless he was; and during performance appraisals he was rated poorly. Jabu had this say about his bullying experiences:

*It has got to a point where I don't expect anything good from the organisation. The HR department is aware of what I have been going through. I have even reported my situation to the head of the HR department, not knowing that the head too, was having problems with the very same person in the CEO's office. The Head of HR has since left the organisation. We are talking about a person with a lot of power and clout in the organisation. My problem is compounded by... "how do you put a finger on bullying".*

Other forms of bullying which Jabu described included being micromanaged, and constantly threatened with expulsion or disciplinary action. Jabu commented that he felt trapped and forced to "stomach" the bullying because he was the breadwinner in his family and had nowhere to go. Jabu feared that the bully had too much influence, even outside an organisation that could block his opportunities. At the same time, Jabu believed that he could be fired at any time, so he described his situation as a "lose-lose situation". In the meantime, Jabu continued to be, in his own words "marginalised and wasted" while he continued to "stomach" the continuing bullying.

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**Susan** has been working in a middle management position for five years. She described her organisation as "extremely hierarchical and regimented" and described



her working situation as “*extremely micromanaged*”. Susan was a White female and the bully was also a White female, and supervisor. Bullying against Susan took the form of being micromanaged; being threatened with disciplinary action for mistakes made; removal of responsibilities and reducing the value of her work; being shouted at; unfair criticism for “*small mistakes*” and constantly pointing to mistakes made and never at good quality work and/or achievement of performance milestones; promoting someone she used to supervise to be her line manager; taking meaningful work away from her, as well as being ganged up on by the line manager (bully) and junior staff. She explained:

*Whatever jobs I was responsible for were taken away. My supervisory duties were taken away; and another thing, she would get colleagues to gang up against me. I supervised two, three people, so one got promoted so that I would not have to oversee her work.*

Susan explained that she had asked to be transferred to another unit, and the transfer was granted. Her line manager was now a Black African male. However, she said, little did she know that she had moved “from the frying pan to the fire”. This she put down to the culture of the organisation:

*The culture of the organisation is predominantly male. It is very insular. People had never worked anywhere, so I don't know if they felt threatened or it was just extreme ignorance. No receptiveness to change or improvement if the suggested improvement or change does not come from them.*

Susan described her experience with her new line manager as being characterised by someone “*who is extremely aggressive, extremely insecure, and as someone who pays lip service to employment equity when it comes to women*”. Susan commented further on the character of the bully: “*I have seen too many incidences where he had said one thing; it was recorded in that exact way, only to be changed to something else*”. When asked whether she had reported the bullying, Susan responded that she had and that nothing came from reporting it. In fact, she believed that reporting the bullying was used against her. She summarised this experience by saying: “*for some reason, the employer turns like a flesh-eating bacteria on the person who rises up and says no*”. Susan is still employed at the same organisation and is still a target of the bullying.

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**Tebogo**, an African female, was a middle manager in HR. Her bully was also a black African female. Tebogo experienced the bullying after her then line manager left. Her line manager reported to the bully, so Tebogo felt buffered by her manager before she left. Tebogo reported being aware of the bullying behaviour her previous manager endured. However, according to Tebogo, her previous line manager was very competent, and could handle the bully. Tebogo explained that her previous line manager was replaced by someone who she described as “*timid and a yes-man*”. This, according to Tebogo did not help matters, because the bully sent orders through the new manager, did not communicate with her directly, except in meetings where the communication would typically entail shooting her work down. The bully, through the often direct, but mainly indirect means of communication sent Tebogo confusing messages and instructions. On many occasions, the bully would also refute having given the instructions, which made Tebogo look like a liar. The bullying also took the form of shifting goalposts, indecision on the part of the bully, gossiping and ridiculing Tebogo behind her back and calling her incompetent. Furthermore, Tebogo explained that when she wanted to leave her department and applied for a position elsewhere in the organisation, she learnt in the end that her line manager had a hand in her not being appointed, after having been shortlisted and after the receiving division was excited about the possibility of her joining them. Tebogo put in a formal complaint, demanding to get feedback on where she fell short in the position she applied for. When nothing came of it, she eventually gave a 24-hour notice resignation and left the organisation.

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**Thembi** joined the organisation through its Graduate Development Programme (GDP) as a fresh graduate from university. Many organisations in South Africa have GDPs which are aimed at providing final year undergraduate or graduates with less than one year experience, valuable working experience. Many of these programmes are attached to reputable business schools, which together with the participating organisations jointly develop up to two-year programmes in which graduates participate.

Graduates who meet the requirements of these programmes are mentored by senior leaders and decision-makers of the participating organisations. The mentors support graduates by creating a strategic context within which graduates can build and develop their business acumen in their chosen fields of specialisation. Mentors also assist graduates in developing professional networks during the formative years of their working life. Thembi's mentor was a White male with many years' experience in the organisation. Thembi was bullied by her mentor who she regarded as not supportive. In addition to teaching their mentees the business world's operations, mentors were also meant to support them with projects and by signing off their assignments before their mentees submitted them to the participating business school. Thembi's mentor rarely performed any of the duties required by the business institution. However, Thembi described her mentor's non-supportive behaviour towards her as "injustice" as opposed to bullying. Even though the narrative of her experiences and working situation described bullying, she still felt that to call her experience bullying "*was a bit harsh*".

Thembi explained that whenever new people were appointed in her division, she was asked to train them, even though she was supposedly junior to them due to her lack of work experience. Her hard work, positive attitude and openness to learning, however, made up for the lack of working experience, and her impact in the division became felt within a short time. Thembi did this on several accounts and each time the people she had helped train would be promoted to higher positions. When a vacancy became open and she applied she was turned down and the person she had trained would be appointed. Thembi lodged a formal complaint demanding to be provided with reasons for her shortcomings which led to her not being successfully appointed, simply being told "*Your time will come*".

Thembi mentioned that there was a high turnover in her division, and that many of the people who left were Black African males and females. She explained that the people who were promoted tended to be White and this led her to belief that the mentor's behaviour had something to do with racial discrimination. Thembi was eventually promoted after several attempts. However, she explained that her salary remained the

same even after she was promoted. She complained to the HR Director about this and related treatments to which she had been subjected, and only then was her salary reviewed, but after what she termed a “tough talking to” by the mentor who admonished Thembi for complaining directly to the HR Director. The bullying continued until Thembi graduated from the programme with flying colours. Her mentor did not attend Thembi’s graduation. Thembi eventually found a position in a different division and reported being happy there.

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**Pieter**, a White Afrikaans-speaking male reported being bullied by an Indian female senior manager who became his line manager after his manager left the organisation. The bullying took many forms, including refusal of access to training and promotion opportunities; being refused to take his annual leave; when granted leave, being called back from leave for what Pieter termed “*non-urgent useless time consuming tasks*”; screaming and shouting; being repeatedly called useless in full view of colleagues (other colleagues in the department reported to being bullied by the same person); manipulation; and blaming. Pieter had this to say about the manner in which the bully went about the bullying: “*You see what Fiona does, is she is very good at what she does. She manipulates people and knows which buttons to press*” and this made it difficult to prove the bullying.

Pieter explained that many people, including himself, had reported the bully’s behaviour to HR, but nothing happened. Instead, many of the people resigned and left the organisation after taking the bully to HR. Pieter is still in the same job, the same organisation because he “*feels trapped*”. He commented, “*In the four years that I have been here, I am at a point where I just don’t care anymore, and I mean I cannot afford to lose my job; but I just feel hopeless*”. Pieter is still a target, the bullying continues because all the cases which were brought against the bully, she (the bully) won and now Pieter continues to suffer in silence, hoping that the bully will leave. Pieter commented that he cannot leave before his chances of securing employment elsewhere

as a White Afrikaner male administrator with no formal qualifications are limited to non-existent.

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**Jane** encountered bullying in her first job which was in a small consultancy environment. The bully was controlling, manipulative and wanted “*you to run everything by her*”, and when you did “*she would pick holes in it and really make you come off looking like a complete twit*”, Jane commented. Additionally, Jane explained that the bully would give an instruction for her to do something, and when she did, the bully “*would come back and scream at you for what you have done, denying that she gave the instruction*”. Jane further explained that “*you couldn’t go back and sort of try and change things back because then the blow up was just unbelievable*”. Jane mentioned that although the organisation had a grievance policy, the policy procedures were not followed because there was an unofficial ‘*norm*’ that in sales it was generally accepted that anyone could do what needed doing to sell. According to Jane, “*the entire organisational culture was run on bullying like that*”. To this end, Jane saw no need to complain because she believed doing so would simply lead to further unpleasantness. Moreover, the person to lodge the grievance to would have been the bully because she was the owner of the business. Jane ultimately put in a 24-hour notice of resignation and left.

Table 4-1 (overleaf) summarises the eight bullying scenarios.

**Table 4-1: Summary of bullying scenarios**

<b>Gender and race of target</b>	<b>Gender and race of bully Relationship with target</b>	<b>Nature of bullying</b>	<b>Target response</b>	<b>Precipitating factors</b>	<b>Outcome of the bullying</b>
Mary (White female)	White female Peer	Constant criticism Verbal abuse	No complaint or grievance	Power imbalance Promotion to a senior position Conflict-driven culture	No longer a target; has a new line manager
Sibongile (African Black female)	White female Peer	Unfair criticism Accused of incompetence	Complaint lodged with head of department (three times; no action)	Promotion to senior position Structural flaws Composition of workgroup Affirmative action	New head of department No longer a target
Jabu (African black male)	African Black male Business Unit Head	Verbal abuse Constant criticism Micro-management Threats of expulsion	Complaint to HR (no action)	Change in leadership	Still in the same job and a target

Gender and race of target	Gender and race of bully  Relationship with target	Nature of bullying	Target response	Precipitating factors	Outcome of the bullying
Susan (White female)	Bully #1: White female (Line manager)  Bully #2: African Black male (Business Unit head)	Micro-management  Constant disciplinary threats  Verbal abuse  Removal of responsibilities	Complaint to HR (no action)	Hierarchical and regimented organisational structures  Power imbalance	Still a target
Tebogo (African Black female)	African Black female  Line manager	Spreading malicious gossips  Accused of incompetence	Complaint to Head of department (no action)	Change in management	Gave 24 - hour notice and left the organisation
Thembi (African Black female)	White male  Mentor	Lack of support  Refused access to training and promotion opportunities	Complaint to HR Director	White male dominated environment  Affirmative action	Transferred to a new job within organisation  No longer a target
Pieter (White male)	Indian female  Line manager	Verbal abuse  Manipulation  Expected benefits withheld	Sought counselling from the organisation's Employee Assistance Programme (EAP)	Change in management  Non-designated Employment Equity employee	Still in the same job  Still a target
Jane (White female)	White female  Owner	Verbal abuse  Unclear and inconsistent instructions	No complaint or grievance lodged	Pressure to improve performance in tough competitive economic conditions	Gave a 24 hour notice and left the organisation

Several themes emerged from the interview data and the bullying scenarios summarised in Table 4-1 (above). Firstly, a close association between bullying and power emerged. For example, in 6 out of the 8 scenarios the targets were bullied by people who were more senior to them. Even in the two cases where Mary and Sibongile were bullied by peers, the bullies had close associations or relationships with executives, and this in turn led to them being perceived as powerful.

Secondly, while a close association between bullying and race or gender emerged, the analysis revealed that bullying tended to occur across both different and same races, and /or genders. For example, Mary, a White female, was bullied by a White female, and Sibongile, an African Black female, was bullied by a White female; whereas Jabu, an African Black male was bullied by an African Black male.

Thirdly, verbal abuse, unfair criticism, and undermining appeared to be the most cited nature of bullying. Fourthly, no action appeared to have been taken against the bullies in instances of the targets lodging formal complaints about the bullying. A close association was found between bullying and motivating structures and processes, such as internal competition (being bullied after promotions); reward system and expected benefits (leave being withheld); and bureaucracy (hierarchical and regimented organisations). Similarly, close associations were found between bullying and precipitating factors, such as changes in management / leadership and the composition of workgroup. Lastly, leaving the organisation or transferring to another job within the same organisation appeared to be the two ways in which the bullying of targets stopped.

Many of the bullying situations and scenarios described are paralleled in the accounts of other targets, HR professionals and bystanders. Examples of parallel stories include working even harder in an attempt to gain the bully's approval; keeping quiet with the hope that the bully will "go away", and ultimately, if all else failed, resigning and leaving the organisation, in some cases giving 24-hour notice even if the employment contract stated a 30-day notice period.



Many of the themes also corroborated Salin's (2003b) bullying conceptual framework. For example, Mary, Jabu and Susan's experiences could be attributed to Salin's *enabling structures and processes*, more specifically, perceived power imbalance, because in their cases the bullies exercised their positional power to bully and disempower their targets. Additionally, the amount of power and influence the bullies had over their targets made the costs to be perceived as low. That is, targets felt powerless to report the bullies and this led to the targets' growing cycle of dissatisfaction and frustration. Similarly, Jabu and Tebogo attributed their bullying experiences to changes in management and composition of workgroups. Both changes in management and the composition of workgroups are component parts of Salin's (2003b) precipitating processes. Their bullying commenced after their line managers left and new people were appointed. In Sibongile's case, another motivating factor for her bullying was internal competition. All the remaining targets' bullying experiences mirrored Salin's (2003b) motivating structures and processes, precipitating processes, or enabling structures and processes in one way or another.

Other themes which emerged from the bullying scenarios and about how HR professionals and targets perceived and defined workplace bullying are classified into two categories, namely, (i) nature of bullying; and (ii) bullying tactics. Each will be detailed in the next sections.

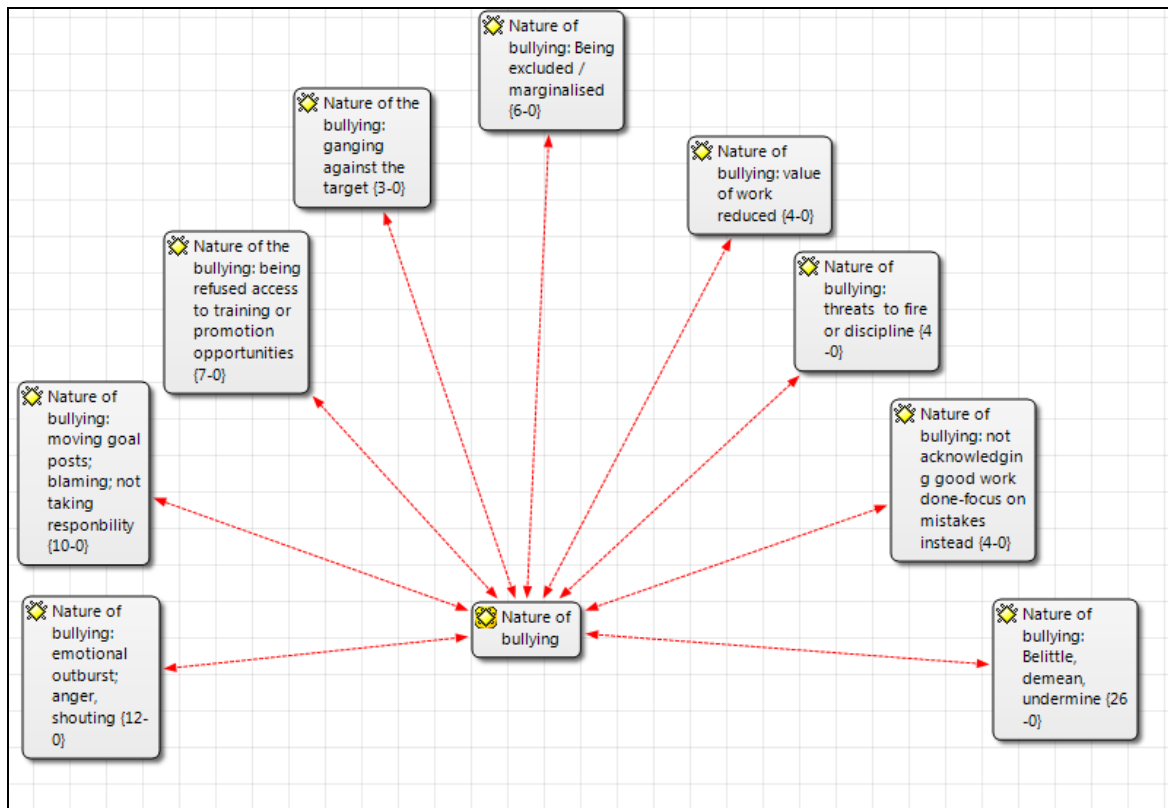
#### **4.4 HOW HUMAN RESOURCE PROFESSIONALS AND TARGETS PERCEIVED AND DEFINED BULLYING**

All the participants of this study described a variety of behaviours which they considered to be bullying. Specifically, the bullying targets talked about the nature of their bullying.

#### 4.4.1 Nature of bullying

Targets of bullying identified belittling, demeaning and undermining as behaviours associated with the most prevalent nature and form of bullying. Other behaviours which targets identified as bullying included emotional outbursts; ‘moving of goal posts’ and bullies not taking responsibility for their own actions; being refused access to training or promotion opportunities; being excluded or marginalised; not acknowledging the good work done; withholding information; blaming; always focussing on mistakes; use of threats and value of work reduced, as well as ganging up against the target (see Figure 4-1, below, for summary).

Figure 4-1: Nature of bullying



These behaviours will be discussed in detail in the following section.

#### **4.4.1.1 Belittle, demean, and undermine**

Most targets identified being constantly belittled, demeaned and undermined in front of colleagues, and sometimes customers as bullying behaviours. Several bystanders also commented that the belittling and demeaning behaviour ranged from the mundane, yet humiliating, to the outright mean and attacking behaviour against the target. One bystander explained:

*Every time we have a meeting that goes over lunch, this manager would want a specific snack made in a particular way brought into the meeting. And this lady much older than her, who happened to be the bully's Personal Assistant [PA] must bring the snack in a particular way; that is, it must be hot. If it is not warm enough, the PA would be told in a harsh condescending tone that the snack was cold, that she must go heat it up. All this in view of people attending the meeting!*

Another bystander corroborated the example above by telling a similar story of demeaning behaviour towards a PA on what is probably dismissed as mundane, but was viewed as demeaning, humiliating and bullying by the bystander. The bystander commented:

*I too have examples of situations where people will all be in a meeting, and usually in meetings, tea is provided for everyone and typically each person would pour a cup for themselves. Each time without failure a PA would come in, go straight to this individual with a tray in full view of everyone at the meeting, executives included...and boom, the tray is put in front of the person who couldn't even care to look up or say thank you for the special delivery. Instead, he would say, "sorry, this milk is cold, please go and warm it up." And we sit there and think but why? What is worse, it does not matter whether there are visitors from outside the organisation.*

A target identified the tone and the manner of being spoken to as well as the message behind that tone, as bullying behaviours. She commented:

*Her tone, when talking to me, the nature of her tone was so demeaning. When you are constantly told and made to believe that you are incompetent, you are worth nothing; that the organisation can actually do without you...it is so humiliating and you actually start to believe that you are actually worth nothing.*

Another target agreed and commented:

*She would talk to me as if I work for her at her home; no sign of respect. Even the e-mails she wrote to me were disrespectful. She would write emails belittling me, saying whatever she wants and copying the whole world.*

Two targets spoke about their efforts to try and intervene to stop the bullying. On both counts, they spoke about how the bullying intensified towards them, instead of stopping. One target commented:

*And so the behaviours continued and from then on, he became openly hostile towards me; even in some of the meetings. He would give feedback to others, when it became my turn, it would be a shouting at, not a talking to / or with a colleague; he would consistently talk down on me, be openly hostile towards me regardless of the issue at hand and in front of everybody.*

The above target indicated that the situation became unworkable to the point that he took an assignment elsewhere and left. Other targets also spoke about instances of constant criticism, even when their work “*spoke differently*”. A few targets mentioned that they could not understand why they were being bullied when the results of the work they did warranted a different treatment. This led many to believe that they were being targeted because they were a threat to the bullies. Many also believed that they were targeted because the bullies felt insecure and thus used their positional power to “*put them in their place*”.

The HR professionals also identified belittling, demeaning and undermining as bullying behaviours. For example, an HR professional referred to the manner in which some managers spoke to their subordinates as “*degrading and demeaning*”, and that the “*talking to*” would normally be done in public, in full view of other employees. In one case, the demeaning behaviour was reported to have been done even in the presence of some internal HR consultants. This led some targets to believe that HR was not capable of assisting them.

The bystanders also identified demeaning and humiliating behaviour as bullying. A bystander defined demeaning and undermining behaviour as, “*the treatment and the manner in which managers spoke to targets in comparison to how they talked to*

*other colleagues of the same race or gender with them*". This particular bystander felt that the perpetrator had racist tendencies and negative tendencies towards female colleagues. Profanity was also identified as bullying behaviour. For example, an HR professional referred to "*situations where repeated references to things with a sexual connotation attached to it*" or the use of foul language as forms of bullying.

The most common aspect which all the study's participants spoke about regarding belittling, demeaning and undermining bullying behaviours was the manner in which bullies spoke to their targets. Many mentioned that the way most bullies spoke to targets bordered on being outright rude. This behaviour, as one target commented, "*...just escalates like an avalanche*". Many felt that the behaviour began with small things then degenerated into consistent abusive behaviour. The study's participants also considered emotional outbursts such as screaming and shouting at targets as bullying behaviour.

#### **4.4.1.2 Emotional outbursts**

Targets referred to emotional outbursts as the manner in which they were spoken to. In many instances, the targets spoke of screaming, shouting, anger and loud banging on tables as examples of behaviour they considered as emotional outbursts. Many targets felt that the emotional outbursts were often not warranted. For example, a target talked about a situation in which she provided her input as the project's subject matter expert to a team comprising her manager and two peers. When the target pointed to what she believed was a mistake and offered a different proposition, the manager reportedly "*ran screaming from the office, shouting, I'm losing control, I'm losing control...*" The target provided the following context, which, in her mind, explained the manager's "*out of control*" reaction and behaviour towards her. She explained:

*When I arrived at the organisation I actually experienced an incredibly weird experience. I thought I was here because they understood what I was able to*

*contribute. The fact that I knew more than everybody else became a problem for the manager. I thought that she knew, that she understood what my area of expertise entailed. First of all, when I joined the organisation I was not inducted into the work environment to explain the culture and how things were done. What I found was an extremely hierarchical and extremely regimented environment. I soon realised that I was not able to apply my skill here. Every time I did something I was reigned in, in the most brutal fashion. I was either called to the manager's office, or threatened by being called into a disciplinary session. When I got to the manager's office, it was never an adult discussion of "you see Mary, this is how we do it. You are responsible for the following areas. It is not an individual occupation that you have. This is a group effort. You have to do everything through consultation. If you wanted to change something or point out that something was wrong, you have to consult and the decision must be a collective decision". I then discovered that it was not so much a question of collaboration; it was a question of the manager being insecure because she was not able to keep tabs of what I was doing.*

In the above scenario, the target perceived the emotional outbursts to be related to the manager's insecurities which stemmed from the target knowing more than the manager. Additionally, the target associated the manager's outbursts to her need to control. The target reduced the manager's need to control to management style.

Another target gave an example of a manager with emotional outbursts. He commented, *"He is used to screaming at people telling them that they have small brains, they are useless, they don't add value, they know nothing..."* A bystander in the same organisation as the target confirmed this manager's behaviour and commented:

*In meetings, he would start an argument or scream at someone and nobody would say anything. You cannot even stop him because he would just carry on. If you try to say something, or intervene, he would leave that person and attack you. It has been like this since I have known him. And he would scream! I am telling you when he screams..., and we just look at him.*

Emotional outbursts directed at people who could not respond back were also humiliating and demeaning to those to whom the outbursts were directed. Similarly, that many of the outbursts were by managers to subordinates highlighted a perceived power imbalance because the targets could not talk back, let alone shout

back. Moreover, the bullies, by virtue of their positions, were perceived to be more powerful than the targets, and even bystanders. For example, a target whose perpetrator was married to the organisation's Chief Operations Officer (COO) commented that the bully would "*get very unpleasant usually via e-mail or telephone for something so small that it did not warrant the outburst*". With regards to the perceived power imbalance, the target commented that the perpetrator had also undermined her through her husband who was the organisation's COO. She commented,

*She has done this multiple times. She undermined me to her husband and I have seen some of the fall-out from that, and the bullying started there in earnest. For example, anything I said in meetings, before I even opened my mouth to try and say something, he would either look at his watch or sit back in his chair or do something else that said "I don't want to listen to you".*

Many of the emotional outburst situations and scenarios described above are paralleled in other participants' stories. The targets and bystanders also felt that 'moving goal posts', blaming and bullies not taking responsibility for their actions constituted bullying behaviours.

#### **4.4.1.3 Moving goal posts, blaming and not taking responsibility**

The targets and bystanders identified 'moving goal posts', blaming and not taking responsibility for instructions gone wrong as bullying behaviours. In many instances, targets felt that the bully's refusal to take responsibility for something which had gone wrong stemmed from a range of causes. These, according to targets and bystanders, include lying and giving vague instructions. The next two examples illustrate the point. A target related the following story to illustrate bullying behaviours associated with moving of goal posts, blaming and not taking responsibility for the direction, or lack of direction provided by the manager;

*Anything that you had always grown up feeling were your strengths, she would just hack away at it, constantly telling you how useless you were at*

*that, how she couldn't trust you to do anything and then she would hone in on whatever you thought you had done particularly well. And really just hone in on that and chisel away at you, and she would also give extremely vague instructions.*

On the vague instructions, the target further commented,

*If you enquired and asked for more clarity, she would tell you how stupid you were and how she couldn't trust you and on, and on, and on it would go. But basically no matter how you did the job, it was the wrong way; it should have been the other way. You could do it both ways and you would be accused of wasting time.*

The above is an example of blaming and not taking responsibility for the form of the instructions given by the bully. Other targets and bystanders corroborated this view.

A target commented:

*The issue for me was she would request the same thing in different ways over, and over, and over, again. At the end of the day it would be like I have not done the work. So basically, what I am saying is that on number of instances she would move the goalpost. If it was not the plan she wanted, it is the policy. If it was not the policy, it was about the implementation of the policy. If it was not implementation it was something else. In all these instances, I had no control over anything because at the end of the day, she was the one who was supposed to have made the decisions; and quite frankly I don't blame her because given the culture of the organisation; she too had to get permission from her superiors as well. So, when the executive committee delayed the decision which impacted on the implementation of the plan or policy, it was not the executive committee or my manager that was perceived as having delayed. It was me.*

The above example is also an illustration of the impact of the organisation's enabling structures and decision-making processes which make bullying possible and likely. Asked how the moving of goal posts and the blame they had to carry as a result made them feel, many targets mentioned that they began to doubt themselves, to think that maybe there was something wrong with their listening and/or understanding skills. One target said she could not understand the "pure, plain lying" and being two-faced. She explained:

*I became emotional and began to think that maybe I am somehow crazy, I am probably imagining things, because I could not comprehend the behaviour of*



*this person; when it was just the two of us, I “understood” and she was happy. When it was just me and her, she would be this bubbly person and we would talk about challenges we are facing in the organisation; about challenges with the organisational culture and leadership style and the frustrations that we were experiencing when it came to deliverables that we were responsible for. It made sense. But outside the bilateral meeting, the issues were different. She would accuse me of not delivering. She would tell people that she was going to take action against me. But after saying these things to whomever, within an hour she would be in my office chatting as if nothing has happened, as if she had not just said these bad things about me. So there was no congruence between her behaviour and her actions. Initially I thought maybe she is not competent; but she is an expert in her field...I was trying to reason on her behalf, and it was just too much for me now because what I was now doing was trying to get into her mind to try and understand her world and how she sees things. In the end, I was left wondering whether she could see the impact of her behaviour on me and other people.*

Many targets and bystanders attributed the blaming and not taking responsibility on the part of the bullies to lies, indecisiveness and/or delayed decision-making. A target mentioned that, in one case, a decision was delayed for a period of as long as ten months. Throughout the period the target was told not to worry about an output that needed to be delivered because it was not a priority. Ten months later, the target was suddenly admonished and told it was a priority. Then, according to the target, the dialogue would go as follows:

**Target:** But you told me that this was not a priority for you at the time

**Bully:** Which meeting were you at? [In a very condescending tone]

**Target:** The minutes were taken; let us refer to the minutes

**Bully:** That is not what I said; I heard myself say this is a priority. How come this was not captured correctly?

At this stage, the person who took the minutes also became a target of the bully's blaming, as the responsibility for the “mistake” shifted to her. A target asked the question:

*Is it possible for someone to just capture the same thing over and over again if*

*it was incorrect?” Also, “is it possible that two people, in fact the entire meeting could have heard one person say the same thing over and over again, only for him or her to stand up and say, that is not what they said?”*

Targets and HR professionals also considered being refused access to training and/or promotion opportunities, to be bullying behaviour.

#### **4.4.1.4 Being refused access to training and promotion opportunities**

The targets and HR professionals talked about consistently refusing to approve employees' application to go for training and/or application for a senior position as bullying behaviour. A target talked about situations in which she was expected to train new people who joined her division, yet, when some of these people resigned, and/or each time promotion opportunities became available, they would overlook her and instead bring someone with less experience than her, who she had to train. This pattern repeated itself several times for a period of over one year. During this time the target had to train new appointees, while being skipped for promotion each time vacancies which matched her skills and experience became available.

When two more people resigned, the target saw the opening as “*her time*”. The target felt that her time had come, for several reasons. First, she felt she was already in the division and that it would take less time to fill either one of the positions. Second, her performance had been consistently good to the extent that she trained and inducted people in positions higher than hers into the division. However, before the target could apply, she mentioned that her manager “*called me to his office and he said, don’t even think about it. Don’t even try to apply for the position. I believe you are not yet ready*”. When the target enquired what it would take to make her “*ready*”, she said that “*no real reasons were given, instead I was send from pillar to post for answers which never came; meanwhile I was expected to continue to train new people..., yet I was not ready for their positions*”. The target in this situation was part of a two-year Graduate Development Programme (GDP). While the above situation was unfolding, the end of her contract was nearing. She

had met all the GDP performance requirements, yet there was no word about what was going to become of her at the end of her contract. Meanwhile, colleagues in similar situations to her, who were also part of the GDP, were being offered permanent positions. The target was ultimately offered a permanent position after she directly approached the HR Director. However, even though the new position she was offered was higher than her current one, her salary remained the same, and was adjusted after several complains and interventions.

Other targets told of their CVs being torn up after applying for positions, and being told that they were fabrications of the truth, and/or being ridiculed with comments such as, “*do you call this thing a CV?*” Others told of being refused to attend courses, and that the courses they wanted to attend had nothing to do with their current jobs. Additionally, some targets reported being granted approval, but with conditions, to attend the training courses. For example, one target mentioned that he was told he could not attend a specific course he had applied for unless he did something he did not agree with for his line manager. The bystander commented, “*So if he wanted to go to a course he needed to do some other stuff for his line manager*”. Being excluded and being marginalised were behaviours that were also considered as bullying.

#### **4.4.1.5 Being excluded / marginalised**

The targets spoke about deliberate exclusion from activities as bullying behaviour. A target commented, “*Information is not brought to your corner, so there is nothing that you do. You become marginalised and you become a spectator in your own organisation*”. Another target spoke of how she compiled the entire staff publication almost on her own, but was not invited to a cocktail function in celebration of the publication. She commented, “*It was not the fact that I was not invited. I didn’t care that I didn’t go. I just noticed that my not being invited was a very glaring exclusion...*”

Others spoke of situations in which they had been made to feel incompetent, when they would be ignored in meetings and not acknowledged or given an opportunity to contribute, as well as being shifted to positions of “*less significance*” and not being given any work to do. One target commented, “*When this starts happening and when you get shifted off to positions with no real responsibilities, you know what is going to happen; your job is on the line*”. A target agreed and commented, “*You will be embarrassed in meetings, you will be ignored, your communication will be ignored, and even in meetings with clients you will be side-lined*”.

Not only did targets and HR professionals see being excluded, isolated, ignored and marginalised as bullying behaviour, they also saw not being acknowledged for good work, instead focussing on mistakes, constantly threatening to fire or discipline someone, as well as reducing the value of one’s work, as bullying behaviours.

#### **4.4.1.6 Not acknowledging good work done – focussing on mistakes; threats to fire or discipline; and value of work reduced**

Targets spoke about how they perceived not being acknowledged for their contributions and with line managers focussing on mistakes as bullying behaviours. One target talked about how his peers and seniors, including his line manager’s superiors, “*acknowledged my work and complimented it, yet my manager never saw anything good in my work. Instead, he was bent on poking holes in everything that I did. Regardless of how good my work was, his only focus would be on heightening the mistakes and pointing out gaps*”. Another target spoke about how he saw being constantly threatened with being fired or discipline as bullying:

*I must get his permission before I do anything, and I have been told by him that I will be fired, that I should get myself another job. In my case everything borders on expulsion; everything is cutthroat. As a result, I am very tense all the time. I feel demobilised. I have become an introvert. I cannot talk in meetings anymore. I only speak when spoken to. I cannot express my mind. I do only what I am supposed to do, what I am told to do. Now, this erodes one’s professionalism and sense of being; it’s like you can’t think anymore.*

*Now if you are in my position where you are constantly being threatened with expulsion and when you reflect on your own circumstances, that you are the only breadwinner, your wife doesn't work, you feel trapped, you feel stuck in this.*

Several targets considered reducing the value of their work to be bullying. A target commented, *"Whatever jobs I was responsible for were taken away. My supervisory duties were taken away. I just sat there with nothing to do"*. Another target also spoke about being told to transfer all her duties to the new appointees she had helped train and induct into their new work environment. She commented:

*Even while the training was going on, they said to me I must give all the duties that I was doing to the lady so that she can stand on her own and do the job on her own. I did not have much of a choice and gave her all my duties. Thereafter, I was bored. It got to be very frustrating with not much to do. When I asked my manager what I was supposed to be doing, she said, "you will be okay because next year we are expecting new things..."; But in the meantime "what am I doing"? No answers. "I was very frustrated and in the end what I would do was take leave throughout the month. I would be on leave and come back month end when we would be doing stock taking and income statements because then it would be a little bit busy and I would have something to do. Otherwise I would be on leave"*.

#### **4.4.1.7 Ganging up against the target**

One target spoke about being ganged up against as bullying behaviour. She commented:

*She would get colleagues to gang up against me. For example, I supervised two, three people, and one got promoted so I would not have to oversee her work. Once promoted, she too ganged people up against me. She would ask them what I did, what I do and then the moment she got some little bit of information I would be dragged into a disciplinary hearing of sorts.*

Targets spoke of tactics bullies used to abuse and disempower them. Examples of these include, controlling management styles, which I captured under the theme *"my way or the highway"*, using performance as a decoy for bullying, captured under the theme *"in the name of performance"*, and manipulation and backstabbing. One

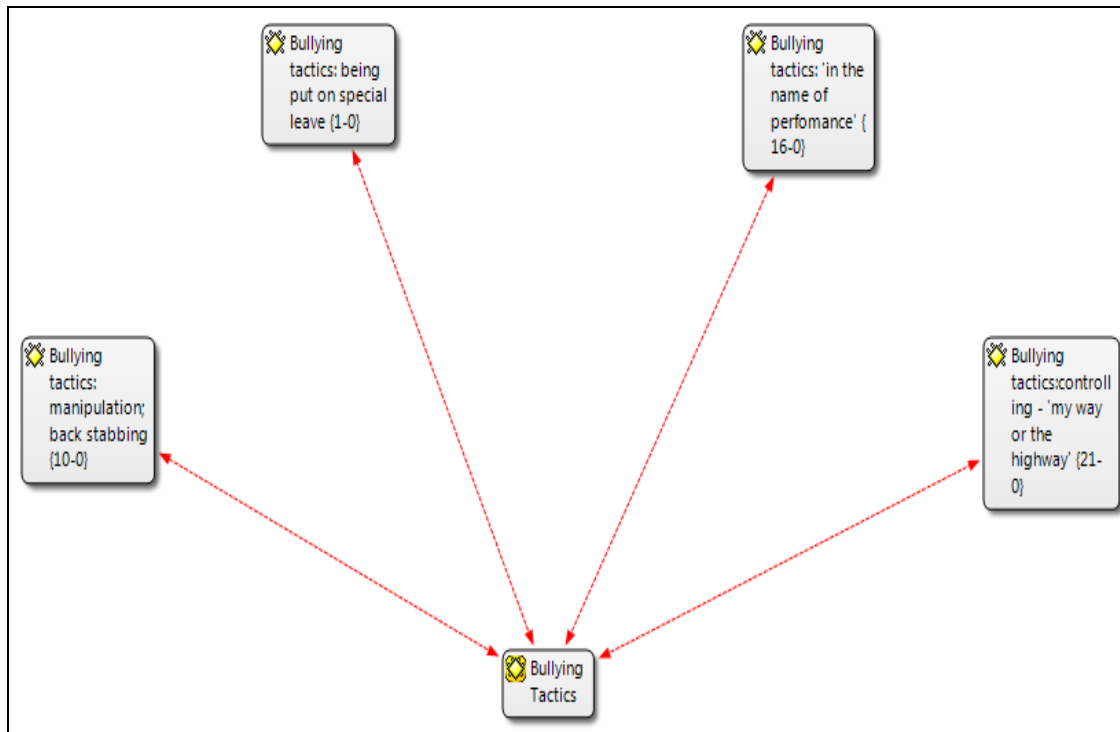
bystander spoke about being put on “*special leave*” as a bullying tactic that was used in her organisation. The next section will look at behaviours which the study’s participants considered as bullying tactics.

#### **4.4.2 Bullying tactics**

The study’s participants distinguished between behaviours which they considered bullying, and those that they considered bullying tactics. The difference lay in the definition of tactics. The *Britannica Concise Encyclopaedia* defines tactics as “...*in warfare, the art and science of fighting battles*”. The *American Heritage Dictionary* on the other hand defined tactics as “*a procedure or set of manoeuvres engaged in to achieve an end, an aim, or a goal*”. What is common about these two definitions is the intent behind the task. That is, in both definitions, there is a goal to achieve. This is how targets, HR professionals and bystanders perceived the tactics and methods used by the bullies. Each act behind what the study participants considered bullying tactics had an end or goal in mind. For example, my analysis revealed that the intent of the “my way or the highway” bullying tactic was to subdue targets into “towing the line”. Similarly, using the poor performance bullying tactic and putting people on “special leave” were seen as tactics whose ultimate goal was to “push someone out” of the organisation.

A controlling management style, under the theme “my way or the highway” was the most frequently cited bullying tactic. “Poor” performance was the second, and was followed by manipulation and backstabbing. Two targets considered being put on special leave as a bullying tactic which was widely used in their organisation. Being put on special leave will be discussed as part of the “my way or the highway” theme (see Figure 4-2 for summary).

**Figure 4-2: Bullying tactics**



These bullying tactics are discussed in detail in the following section.

#### **4.4.2.1 Controlling – my way or the highway**

The phrase “my way or the highway” is generally understood to mean, “do what I say or face the consequences”. This is how many targets and HR professionals with whom I spoke described the controlling tactics used by some bullies. A target explained, “*This is a senior person who wants things to be done in a particular way, and that way only*”. The target further explained that doing things differently from the way the senior person wanted them done, would cause trouble. Many targets and HR professionals mentioned that the senior people who used the controlling bullying tactic were powerful and wielded much power. As a result, they tended to do as they wished, without being questioned or giving reasons for their actions and decisions. A target commented, “*He doesn’t give reasons. The power he wields is such that he*

*doesn't have to give reasons. He will just scratch this out, scratch that out, and scratch that out."*

Another target spoke of her line manager, whom she described as a "controlling woman" who was never satisfied with work done by her subordinates. A target commented, "Basically no matter how you did the job, it was the wrong way, it should have been the other way". Others spoke of managers who they described as "liking to have the last word". A target commented, "He doesn't care whether people have got brilliant ideas. His word is the last word". The target explained further:

*He would tell us to engage in robust debates to generate ideas. But, his ideas were the ones that were held up, and anybody else wouldn't. Yet, he would continue to ask for ideas and when you put your ideas forward, they would not count. He liked to shoot people's ideas down and he behaved as if he knew everything...*

Another target of the same bully agreed and commented:

*He even has the tendency of accusing you of things that you have not done. He would not even give you a chance to explain why you did things the way you did. It was always about him and him alone. So other people's views and ideas did not count.*

Ultimately, according to one target, "the idea [of controlling] is to make you ultimately agree that you are not who you are". Another target saw the main goal of using controlling bullying tactics as turning people into "yes men and yes women" who would not challenge the senior person.

These bullying tactics induced fear in targets. An HR professional commented that even in cases in which targets would come to HR to complain about the perpetrator they were often too scared to lodge formal grievance proceedings. The HR professional commented, "Because this person is a senior person, already everybody is fearful of challenging the person". It was generally known that those who challenged the seniors ended up being personally attacked. An HR professional believed that the prevailing climate of controlling bullying tactics was because "they [seniors] themselves felt that they were being bullied by their superiors".



An HR professional spoke of a case of bullying which started with a request by an employee, a mother, who wanted an arrangement to shift her lunch hour in order for her to be able to pick up her child:

*This lady wanted to pick up her child from school, but her lunch was from twelve to one, whereas the school comes out at two. So she pleaded with her manager to allow her to take lunch from one-thirty to two-thirty to be able to pick up the child. It was not convenient for the manager, but he made an exception. However, by granting the employee her wish, he usurped the authority to dictate to her. He would say, "I want you to do this and I want you to do that". Then he started requesting things, or made her do things that were outside her conditions of employment. For example, he allowed her to take lunch later to pick up her child, but would ask her to go pay his bills whilst she was at it. This opened opportunities for further manipulation.*

The above scenario is an example of a situation that began with small favours in exchange for what the target needed and escalated to a controlling and bullying situation. An HR professional mentioned that the situation became so bad that the target lodged a formal grievance procedure against the manager. When asked about the bullying tactic of putting people on special leave, the targets spoke about executives who would suddenly leave the organisation, and the official communiqué would simply state that their contracts were not renewed, or the most recent one, "they are on special leave". A target commented, "*And you don't come back to the organisation once you are on special leave. The special leave is permanent*". The bullying tactic of putting people on special leave was therefore perceived as a disguise for firing people, or pushing people out of the organisation.

Not only did targets and HR professionals believe that perpetrators used controlling behaviours as bullying tactics, they also believed that poor performance was used as a tactic for bullying.

#### **4.4.2.2 In the name of performance**

Many targets and HR professionals felt that poor performance was used as a bullying tactic. An HR professional commented, *“And this is how it happens. There are very, very stringent targets and objectives in place. And, as a result, there is more pressure from management to staff members to deliver, and this pressure often translates into bullying”*. For example, in the manufacturing industry, there are daily and monthly targets which cumulatively, contribute to the organisation’s overall profitability targets. HR professionals felt that bullying is able to thrive *“because managers think that what they are doing is merely managing performance better than before”*. This led some HR professionals to believe that *“bullying often camouflaged as under-performance while not taking into account the context and situation”*. For example, an HR professional commented, *“How is someone supposed to perform if the manager is not delegating, and is doing everything himself?”*

However, other HR professionals believed that some issues which are brought to their attention are indeed related to poor performance. They believed that bullying is a two-way street, and that some employees hid behind harassment or bullying, when in fact they did not perform. An HR professional commented,

*There are issues which are perceived as performance related bullying tactics, which are in actual fact performance issues. You have employees who are quick to cry wolf and say that they are being bullied, when in fact they are not performing and the manager is merely managing their performance. We found that a few of the cases reported as bullying were in fact poor performance.*

Targets felt that the pressure to deliver on these stringent targets translated into bullying behaviours such as *“demanding more with less staff”* because as part of cutting costs, *“the first thing organisations do is downsize”*, as reported by one target. A manager, who was also bullied by his manager added to the bullying debate in general and to the performance-bullying debate in particular, but this time from the manager perspective:

*Since I first saw your topic, I asked myself if I have bullied. I will not say I bullied. I think I have been quite harsh with some of the people that had reported to me, especially around performance. You know, with some people I had to be difficult, so pushed them hard...so, was I bullying? I think I got close to that at one point; close to being a bully. Sometimes driving people to perform is needed, so this makes me think bullies probably think that they are doing the right thing.*

The above scenario points to what some HR professionals perceived as the fine line between bullying and poor performance. The following story told by a target is another illustration of how bullying can be associated with performance:

*This case is about an international agency which was headed by someone who had a reputation for delivering and making things happen. So what became bullying over a period of two years was located in exactly that! That is, the drive to deliver and make things happen! For example, the head of the agency had a few individuals that she wanted “to channel towards a certain direction”, in the name of creating a culture of performance. The work that she did was brilliant work in the end. However, the manner in which she did the work resulted in a toxic environment that was created by repeated incidents of bullying; of getting people to do certain things in a particular way, and within tight time-frames, as well as demanding of people to change and become something else. Someone else would see the outcome as successfully transforming the organisational culture of the institution into one which is performance-based. But those on the receiving end perceived this as bullying.*

The scenario described above paralleled other targets’ stories of performance-based bullying tactics. A target commented,

*If you as much as make noise about the tight delivery time-frames, then they slap you with poor performance and you are still in the dog-box anyway. So it is hard. And I would imagine that speaks to bullying because you do extra just because you want to prove yourself that you are not what people perceive you to be.*

In the next section, I detail what targets and HR professionals labelled manipulation and backstabbing bullying tactics.

#### **4.4.2.3 Manipulation and backstabbing**

Targets and HR professionals spoke about how using guilt and speaking about and/or complaining about someone behind his/her back could be considered bullying tactics. Being manipulative and succeeding at it is a skill. A target talked about how good the perpetrator was in manipulating them through guilt:

*She is very good at what she does. She manipulates people and knows which buttons to press. For example, she called me to come in to work when I was on leave. When I said no, but I am on leave, she reminded me of the number of times I had to take several hours of my work to meet with my Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) counsellor. And the way she does things is she would twist and turn things around, and make it look like you are the one at fault, not her. She is brilliant at that. For example, one Monday I overslept and came in late. She said, no, it's fine, don't worry, I understand. And I worked overtime. Then she wanted to take the time I came late off my overtime. How can you tell an employee one thing and the next day you say another thing? And you see, it is very difficult for me to go to HR and say I am bullied, because how do I prove that I am being bullied. It is difficult to even prove bullying in court!*

A target talked about how the bully who was his line manager repeatedly encouraged them to talk and “*share even our personal stuff with her*” then turned around and used the information against them. Another target spoke about how the bully manipulated people. He commented, “*When your manager is on leave and she needs you, you would be the best thing under the sun, up to the point where she had everything she needed, then her whole attitude would completely change again.*” Another spoke about how the bully manipulated by using “*divide and conquer*” tactics.

Targets also talked about workplace bullying in relation to other negative acts at work, such as harassment and discrimination. A few felt that bullying was part of harassment, while others felt harassment and bullying, as well as discrimination were very different. These views are expanded on in the following section.

## 4.5 WORKPLACE BULLYING AND OTHER NEGATIVE ACTS AT WORK

Research question 2 asked the study participants how bullying differed from other negative acts at work, such as sexual harassment and/or racial discrimination. Several themes emerged from the analysis of this research question. Firstly, many participants alluded to the difficulty in naming or proving bullying, and concluded that workplace bullying is complicated. I summarised the participants' views on the complex nature of bullying under the theme, "The problem with workplace bullying". Secondly, many targets, HR professionals and bystanders had differing opinions regarding whether or not workplace bullying differed with other negative acts at work such as harassment and the different forms of discrimination. I discuss these varying views under the theme, "Bullying and other negative acts at work". Thirdly, my analysis revealed that some targets and HR professionals called bullying by other names that had a South African connotation. I report these findings under the theme, "Bullying by other names". Lastly, I report what targets, HR professionals and bystanders' described as "insights from talking about bullying".

### 4.5.1 The problem with workplace bullying

Targets, HR professionals and bystanders believed that the greatest problem with bullying in the context of South Africa was that many still did not associate it with the workplace. Therefore, not many associated and/or identified the incivility in their workplaces as bullying. In essence it was an invisible problem. To illustrate this point, an HR professional commented:

*In my twenty years of service only one person coined their experience at work as bullying. The individual, I was informed, stood on the edge of a cliff. He could not carry on anymore. So he went to see a psychologist and the psychologist told him "you are being bullied". The psychologist sought the advice of a legal expert, a labour lawyer, and they eventually came to the conclusion that this guy had been bullied.*

A bystander commented that the above scenario illustrated another problem with workplace bullying, namely, that in many cases “*people are not even aware that they are being bullied*”. Furthermore, the bystander believed that there was always a motive, and/or goal behind the bullying:

*Part of the problem is that bullying is totally different. It is a complex issue. It is not something you can pinpoint. Many a time the victim is not even aware that he or she is being abused, whereas other negative acts such as sexual harassment can be proven. In the few cases which would pass as bullying, based on your study's definition, the accused would argue that his / her behaviour is wrongly interpreted; that whatever is brought against him / her was not what he / she meant. However, what is interesting is that the interpretation is always wrong when it comes to a particular person, and things come out wrong when it comes to that particular person, so something is wrong somewhere. And hence I am saying bullying is intentional. There is a reason why the perpetrator targets a particular person and not the other.*

Similarly, many HR professionals believed that perpetrators often get away with bullying because it is difficult to prove. Additionally, an HR professional commented that another difficulty was that “*I can't get anybody to come forward and complain because they are scared*”. A bystander agreed with the sentiment by the HR professional and commented:

*Bullying is a very soft thing that you can't actually pinpoint and say, this is bullying. You can feel it; however the difficulty we have is that we cannot describe it because it is invisible. You can't say, see, there walks a bully. But you can feel the fear and unpleasantness in the atmosphere.*

The fact that some targets could not touch bullying but could feel it was confusing. A target commented, “*When I complained about the treatment from my line manager, some people turned around and said to me perhaps you need to do some introspection because she's not like that to us, ask yourself why she is like that to you...*” This sentiment parallels other targets' views that the nuances of bullying are often hard to explain to someone who had not been exposed to its wrath. Many targets believed that bullying was not easy to confront because it was neither easily identifiable nor understood in the South African workplace. For example, in one of the focus group discussions, a bystander commented:

*I am still battling to actually understand what bullying within the context of an organisation means. People may think that controlling is bullying and given that all organisations have hierarchies and responsibilities that go with positions in those hierarchies, I am thinking, is it bullying or is it controlling? For me, it is controlling and coordinating the activities to make sure that the organisation achieves its goals. I believe that certain people have got to be told what to do and how to do it. Whether you explain to the person why you want it done a certain way is another thing...so is it bullying or is it mere controlling?*

That different people think differently about what bullying is, or is not, attests to the complex nature of the phenomenon. Similarly, not all targets, HR professionals or bystanders were unanimous about how and whether workplace bullying differed with other negative acts at work, such as harassment, victimisation or discrimination. Others saw workplace bullying as a form of harassment, while others saw it as completely different from harassment. I detail these differences in the next section.

#### **4.5.2 Bullying and other negative acts at work**

When asked how bullying differed from other negative acts at work, such as harassment and discrimination, many targets, HR professionals and bystanders answered that they saw bullying as one of the behaviours in the other workplace negative acts continuum. For example, one bystander believed that bullying was part of harassment. She commented, “*Sexual harassment is just another form of bullying*”. A bystander agreed and referred to bullying as “*subtle*” harassment; because it was not as explicit as sexual harassment.

Few of the study’s participants made a distinction between sexual harassment and harassment, describing the former as gender-specific and physical in nature, and the latter (including bullying) as psychological in nature. These distinctions tended to overlap. For example, according to one HR professional, bullying might involve targeting a personal characteristic of an individual, such as gender, physique or appearance, and therefore overlap with sexual harassment. The study’s participants who saw bullying as

part of other negative acts at work such as harassment highlighted the inter-relationships and related difficulties of drawing a definite line between the behaviours.

Similarly, other participants saw victimisation as a form of bullying. A bystander who participated in one of the focus group discussions commented:

*I was thinking about the difference between bullying and victimisation as I was driving here. I was trying to figure out what constitutes bullying and what constitutes victimisation and I still don't have an answer because to me the two are so intertwined to the point that I do not know where bullying starts and ends and where victimisation starts and ends.*

However, not all targets, HR professionals or bystanders believed that there was no clear line between bullying and other negative acts work. In the following section, I detail what the study's participants saw as differences between bullying and other negative acts at work, such as harassment and discrimination.

#### **4.5.2.1 How bullying differs from harassment and discrimination**

The targets, HR professionals and bystanders who believed that there was a difference between bullying and other negative acts at work, highlighted several characteristics which helped them distinguish bullying from harassment or discrimination. They summarised these characteristics as: (i) the ability to prove the behaviour as offensive; (ii) persistence of the behaviour; (iii) the type of and source of power; and (iv) key precipitating factors (see Table 4-2, overleaf, for a summary).



**Table 4-2: How bullying differs from harassment and discrimination**

Bullying	Harassment and discrimination
<b>Difficulty to prove</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limited awareness of the existence of the phenomenon</li> <li>Lack of shared understanding and/or definition of what bullying is, or is not</li> <li>No policies</li> </ul>	<b>Relatively easy to prove</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>High levels of awareness and shared understanding of what harassment / discrimination mean</li> <li>Legal protection and existence of policies</li> </ul>
<b>Persistence</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Bullying behaviour is repetitive (most of the bullying reported by targets occurred over a period of between 6 and 12 months)</li> </ul>	<b>Once-off</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Harassment and/or discriminatory behaviours do not have to be repetitive to be considered offensive</li> </ul>
<b>Source of power</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Positional/ hierarchical / organisational / racial and gender power</li> </ul>	<b>Source of power</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Located in gendered / racial power</li> </ul>
<b>Key organisational factors</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Motivating structures and processes (e.g. internal competition; reward system and expected benefits)</li> <li>Precipitating processes (e.g., restructuring and downsizing; changes in management)</li> <li>Enabling structures and processes (e.g., perceived power imbalance)</li> </ul>	<b>Key organisational factors</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Diversity (e.g. increased gender mix)</li> <li>Gendered / racial hierarchies</li> </ul>

There are at least four distinguishable features from Table 4-2 (above) which differentiate workplace bullying from harassment and discrimination. Firstly, many of the study's participants agreed that bullying is difficult to prove, when compared to harassment or discrimination. They attributed this difficulty to workplace bullying being still in its infancy and thus not yet recognisable in the South African workplace. As a result, it is a relatively unknown phenomenon. Harassment and discrimination on the other hand are widely known as unacceptable behaviour. Additionally, harassment and discriminatory behaviours are protected by the law. To this end, many organisations, including all the employees of organisations which formed part of this study, have

harassment policies and Employment Equity policies which outlaw any form of discrimination on the basis of race or gender. A target illustrated the point:

*It is generally understood what harassment or sexual harassment means. The same cannot be said of workplace bullying. With sexual harassment, for example, I can tell whether you have touched me or you haven't touched me; whether you have used sexually demeaning words or you haven't; etcetera. In short, I can prove whether I have been sexually harassed or not. But the problem with workplace bullying is I cannot do that.*

An HR professional agreed that negative acts such as harassment and discrimination were easier to prove than bullying:

*I think harassment is easier to deal with because we have set policy guidelines and rules which make it a lot easier to prove. However, proving bullying is not as easy because it is quite difficult to go to your manager and say I don't like the way this person talks to me. It all comes back to "can you prove it; can you provide the evidence to show that this is actually what happened". Bullying is much more difficult to prove because many a times it happens in subtle ways and often between two people, away from witnesses.*

Many participants of the study agreed that another contributory factor to making bullying difficult to prove lay in its subtlety. An HR professional explained:

*Personally I have had an experience of a colleague who would come to my office crying from time to time and I couldn't clearly get what the actual problem was. Although the problem appeared to revolve around task assignment or delegation or something like that, I just had a feeling that the problem went beyond that. It was hard to tell though.*

Other targets corroborated the sentiment above. A target commented, "*Remember with bullying, the onus lies on me to prove that I am being bullied; and at times it happens behind closed doors between just the two of us*".

Secondly, many participants believed that a feature which differentiated workplace bullying from other negative acts at work was persistence. That is, for negative behaviour to be classified as bullying it must occur consistently over a period of at least six months, whereas a once-off incident can be considered to be harassment or discriminatory. An HR professional commented:

*I think that bullying does far more damage than harassment or discrimination because the mere fact that it is subtle and difficult to prove means that it can continue for a long time before anybody realised that it is actually bullying. For example, this colleague of mine who regularly cried in my office could not even, in clear terms put to me what was the issue, and this continued over some three or so years that I have been encountering her in my office.*

Many targets, HR professionals and bystanders felt that discrimination based on race or gender was a function of socialisation from childhood which became hardwired in the form of stereotypes which, over time, became difficult to unlearn.

Thirdly, many participants of the study felt that another way in which workplace bullying differed from harassment and discrimination was the *source of power*. Many targets, HR professionals and bystanders believed that bullies derived their power from the positions they occupied in their organisations and from the influence this positional power gave them. A target commented, *“In my view, I associate bullying more with power; with positions that give power”*. This view was echoed by other targets and bystanders who mentioned that the bullies in their organisations were powerful influential people who occupied senior managerial and leadership positions. Fourthly, many targets, HR professionals and bystanders believed that the power was, in the case of harassment and/or discrimination, located in gender or race.

The targets, HR professionals and bystanders talked about names they felt were more appropriate to define ‘bullying’, a term that did not resonate well with many participants. Some of the terms used by participants to describe bullying had a South Africa-specific tone to them, as illustrated in the next sub-section.

#### **4.5.2.2 Bullying by other names**

My analysis revealed a new theme regarding how targets perceived and/or felt about bullying. While all targets agreed that the behaviours they experienced could be considered bullying within the context of the study’s operational definition of bullying, two targets felt that the term ‘bullying’ did not resonate well with them. The one target

went as far as commenting that the term bullying was “*harsh*”. She described her bullying experiences instead as “*injustice*”, and as “*unfair treatment*”. She commented, “*I have never viewed my experiences as bullying. So to call it bullying is a little bit harsh. I call what I experienced unfair treatment, which is more like injustice, like discrimination or even racism*”. Some HR professionals and bystanders also used other terms to refer to bullying. Many of the terms used were either connected to the South African history or to the South Africa’s legislative environment introduced after 1994 (see Table 4-3, below, for summary).

**Table 4-3: Bullying by other names**

Word / phrase	Most common bullying term used in the study
Bullying / Workplace bullying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Injustice</li> <li>• Victimisation</li> <li>• Discrimination               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Gender inequality</li> <li>○ Racial inequality</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Unfair labour practice / constructive dismissal</li> </ul>

The targets who used the terms ‘injustice’ and ‘discrimination’ believed they were unfairly treated because of their race. Additionally, they felt that the bullying they experienced was due to the bullies’ resistance to societally-induced radical change in South Africa. This perception stemmed from an observation that most bullies in many of the “injustice” and “unfair treatment” cases were found to be mainly White males. Others equated bullying with unfair labour practice and/or constructive dismissal. Constructive dismissal and unfair labour practices in South Africa’s workplaces are protected by the Labour Relations Act, (LRA), Act 66 of 1995, Sections 185, 186 and 192 which give precise definitions of unfair labour practice and constructive dismissal. Typically, these are practices by employers which the Act deems to be so unfair to employees to the point of driving employees to resign without serving notice or give 24-hour notice due to

unbearable conduct by the employer towards the employee. However, the burden of proving unbearable conduct and unfair treatment by the employer lies with the employee. One HR professional likened the employee's responsibility to prove unfair treatment or constructive dismissal to bullying. She commented, "*Like bullying, it is very difficult to prove constructive dismissal*". A few other participants also likened workplace bullying to unfair labour practice and constructive dismissal as defined in the LRA, Sections 185, 186 and 192 which define constructive dismissal as a situation "where an employee resigns with or without notice or leaves employment due to unfair pressure, unreasonable instruction or unbearable conduct on the part of the employer". Constructive dismissal is generally interpreted as entailing situations in which employees feel forced to resign and leave their employment because it has become intolerable.

As discussed above, questions were raised about where bullying starts and ends, and where victimisation, discrimination or harassment start and end. However, notwithstanding how targets, HR professionals or bystanders perceived and defined workplace bullying relative to other negative acts at work, everyone I spoke with agreed that talking about workplace bullying heightened their level of awareness about the phenomenon. Additionally, most targets, HR professionals and bystanders alluded to having derived some understanding and insights from talking about bullying in the workplace.

#### **4.5.2.3 Insights from talking about bullying**

Several insights emerged from the interview discussions with the study's participants, in addition to those already cited earlier in the chapter. The most prevalent insight involved close association of bullying with schools. For example, an HR professional illustrated the immediate inclination to associate bullying with schools:

*Many a time, organisations are not aware of the existence of bullying because bullying is a new phenomenon in the context of a work environment. We always*

*thought bullying happens at school, and in the work environment I don't think we are defining it as bullying. Instead, we tend to view the bullying behaviour as either racism or gender inequality.*

Another HR professional agreed, and commented, “*We still think bullying happens at schools*”. Many other participants admitted to reducing what could have been bullying to racism, victimisation or gender discrimination because as someone said, “*it's incredibly difficult to pinpoint or touch bullying*”. However, after talking about bullying and reflecting upon experiences within the context of the workplace, all participants came to the conclusion that bullying did happen in the work environment but that it might not have been named as such. An HR professional commented, “*I think it does happen. Maybe we have not yet identified and defined it as bullying in the workplace*”. A bystander summed up this insight when he said during the focus group:

*What I learnt is that the bullying that takes place in a simple classroom at primary school or even high school manifests in the boardroom in a different format; in a suit, in spectacles, and in a very sophisticated way. What I have learnt is that unless we do something at very early stages of our children's lives, we should be prepared to not only embrace, but to acknowledge the mistakes we have made by not addressing bullying early, because those mistakes appear in the boardroom.*

Another bystander offered her view on bullying in the workplace and on how she thought it differed from school bullying:

*I never really thought of bullying in the context of a work environment. Bullying for me has always been something that happens in schools. While listening to this discussion, I am already back into the school days, and I think I understand why we have not agreed on the definition of bullying in the workplace, because at school a boy either kicks you and takes your money. But at work they do not kick you. They give you a low rating during a performance appraisal and that has financial implications. That is taking your money, but without openly kicking you. But this is a harder kick...*

Several participants also felt that the subtle nature of bullying and its being conflated with harassment, victimisation and other negative acts at work contributed to a general lack of awareness of its existence and prevalence. Other participants even felt that the bullies themselves might not be aware that they were bullying others, and that many

targets were often unaware that they were being bullied because, as one target put it, “*I just thought that I have a horrible boss; I just thought well, he is not a nice person, he is a horrible person. I also don’t believe that bullies are aware that they are bullies*”. Some participants concluded that this subtle characteristic of bullying made it very dangerous, others going so far as to say that workplace bullying was more dangerous than intimidation and victimisation because the last two could be described and explained, thus making it easier to address and deal with, whereas they found workplace bullying hard to pin down. A target commented:

*With bullying you are always trapped in words and body language, things that you cannot record unless you have a video. Now, tell me of an environment where you would walk and work with a video camera all the time just for you to one day prove that indeed you are bullied?*

Another insight that emerged was the close association between bullying and power. A bystander commented:

*If you look at gender inequality, it is when a male believes he is senior, has more power and therefore thinks he is above the female. If you look at racism, one race believes “I am superior and therefore have power over you”. And when it comes to seniority in a work environment, it is also about “I am senior and I am a manager, therefore I have power over you”.*

A close association between bullying and power emerged in most of the interviews with targets. Nine out of the 11 targets interviewed were bullied by their superiors in the form of line managers, or by individuals in positions above those of their line managers. In all these cases, the targets cited the use of power over them by their bullies. Two targets out of the 11 interviewed were bullied by peers. However, even in these two cases the bullies had more power than their targets due to their relationships and connections with people of power in the organisation. In all 11 cases the targets indicated that bullies used their positional power to bully and disempower them.

Overall, the insights from discussing workplace bullying with the study’s participants revealed that the understanding of harassment and victimisation and/or discrimination of any form was generally better understood than workplace bullying. Many agreed that

harassment was much more straightforward to identify and “touch”, than was the case with workplace bullying because it had legal protection in the form of the Protection from Harassment Act 17 of 2011. One of the significant insights about workplace bullying, given the general lack of awareness of the phenomenon in the South African workplace, was aptly summed up by an HR professional when she commented, “*You need to understand that the majority of the time the individual does not know that he or she is being bullied. That is our biggest problem*”. This may be attributed to companies not having bullying-specific policies.

#### **4.6 SUMMARY**

This chapter discussed how HR professionals and targets perceived and defined workplace bullying. It also provided an overview of several targets’ bullying experiences to put into context the HR professionals and targets’ perceptions and definition of workplace bullying. Lastly, the chapter discussed participants’ views with regards to whether or not workplace bullying differed from other negative acts at work, such as harassment and discrimination.

My analysis highlighted the factors that led targets to label their experiences as bullying. Additionally, the analysis provided insights into how both HR professionals and targets either likened and/or distinguished workplace bullying from other negative acts at work, such as harassment and racial or gender discrimination. Furthermore, the legislative environment which came into effect after South Africa’s democracy in 1994 appears to have influenced how people perceived workplace bullying relative to other negative acts at work.

Various similarities and differences emerged from the interviews and focus group discussions data. Similarities emerged in what participants considered as bullying behaviour. How participants made sense of bullying and why it happened was consistent with Salin’s (2003b) framework. The study found bullying to be related to (i) power relations specifically power inequalities and a need to assert authority by those



with positional power; (ii) uncertainty as a result of change or anticipated change; (iii) a competitive culture; (iv) management and leadership styles; (v) change in management or leadership; (vi) the need to assert authority by those in power; (vii) excessive workloads; and (viii) negative work environment, to name a few examples.

A new finding was how participants distinguished between 'nature of bullying' and 'bullying tactics' in their definition of workplace bullying. I have not found this distinction in the extant literature on workplace bullying. Further analysis revealed that for many targets, the term 'bullying' did not resonate well with them. Some considered the term bullying as harsh and preferred alternative terms such as 'injustice' and 'unfair treatment'. Lastly, my analysis revealed that the traditional categorisation of bullying players into three categories, namely, target, bully and bystander did not apply. For example, in this chapter, four of the nine HR professionals interviewed also identified themselves as targets of bullying. Similarly, as will be shown in chapter 5, some bystanders also identified themselves as targets of bullying. Chapter 5 also discusses how bystanders made sense of workplace bullying and their role in bullying situations.

## CHAPTER 5

### FINDINGS: HOW BYSTANDERS MAKE SENSE OF BULLYING AND THEIR ROLE IN BULLYING SITUATIONS

#### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

In the preceding chapter, I detailed how HR professionals and targets defined behaviours and tactics which they considered to be bullying. Some targets highlighted their discomfort with the term ‘bullying’. Additionally, the targets and HR professionals articulated what they believed to be similarities and differences between bullying and other negative acts at work, such as harassment and discrimination. All the behaviours and tactics which the HR professionals and targets considered to be bullying paralleled those reported by bystanders. Bystanders, however, bring different insights to the understanding of workplace bullying. In this chapter, I focus on providing these insights. I first discuss how bystanders perceive workplace bullying, including how they made sense of how, and why bullying happened in their organisations. Second, I report on how bystanders described their role in bullying situations. Third, I discuss the metaphors and analogies bystanders used to contextualise and deepen their understanding of bullying.

#### 5.2 WORKPLACE BULLYING: THE BYSTANDER PERSPECTIVE

Bystanders are generally understood in this study as people who witness bullying in the workplace, but are not targets or bullies. They are generally thought of as passive observers of bullying. The bystanders who were part of this study’s focus group discussions responded in multiple ways to the bullying they witnessed. A few responded in a manner that went against the general depiction of bystanders as passive observers. For example, some bystanders reported taking action by intervening and talking to the bully. Others took action by talking to, and/or comforting the target. Lastly, others did the

“expected thing from bystanders” and simply looked the other way. These findings suggest that the depiction of bystanders as innocent, passive observers of bullying at work is not always correct. For purposes of this study, I applied the widely used definition of a ‘bystander’ as someone who had witnessed bullying but was not himself / herself a bully or target (van Heugten, 2011), to guide my coding and subsequent analysis.

In what follows, I provide a synopsis of how bystanders made sense of bullying with regards to how and why the bullying they witnessed occurred.

### **5.2.1 How and why bullying happens**

The bystanders highlighted a variety of organisational, societal and personal factors as reasons bullying happened in their organisations. They felt organisational culture; organisational values and leadership ethos; the current labour market, specifically the high levels of unemployment; and personality issues, were the main contributors of bullying in organisations.

To better understand how bystanders made sense of the bullying, I provide two examples that emerged during focus group discussions of how and why they believed bullying happened in their organisations. These examples represent what was generally shared by other bystanders in the focus group.

A bystander who once worked for a timber company in a province outside Gauteng was assigned to work closely with a woman (the target) who was responsible for training. The bystander’s mandate was to design a training programme for women who worked in the forestry industry because a programme of that nature did not exist. Before the bystander joined the company, the target was reportedly, constantly belittled by her superior, and was told that the company was bringing in a person (the bystander) who was better than her. According to the bystander, these negative messages were constantly fed to the target, undermining her confidence. By the time the bystander

arrived at the organisation, a negative energy which she was initially not aware of, had already been cultivated. The bystander commented:

*It was like there was a voice inside the target that constantly told her she was inadequate and she danced to that tune. All she wanted to talk about was the bully. I told her that the bully did not own her; that she had no power over her, but it was difficult because she was a victim and the life of a victim is focused on the perpetrator.*

According to the bystander, the bullying affected all the decisions the target made, including decisions about where to take her children to school; how she related to her partner; and how she spent money because she felt that she was facing impending dismissal. The bystander commented, “*She knew that an explosion could occur anytime and all would be lost, should she lose her job*”. As a result, the target endured the bullying because she felt she could not afford to lose her job. Moreover, the target believed that her options were limited and that she had nowhere to go. The bystander believed that the reason the bullying happened was mainly because the bully wanted to prove herself because she was the only woman on the Board of her organisation. The bully was herself under great pressure to make sure that things ran as expected at all times, and to prove herself and her worth as the only woman on the Board. Consequently, the bully passed this pressure onto the target and a male colleague who was part of the team. The male target dealt with the bullying differently by deciding “*to drink and smoke and not come to work on time, or by simply finding ways of staying away from the bully*”. The bystander further commented; “*he dealt with the bullying by abusing substances and killing himself inside*”.

Another bystander commented on the bullying she witnessed. The scenario was about a person who was appointed to a high position due to having been highly connected with the organisation’s executives, including the CEO. Suspicions were raised by the manner in which the person (bully) was appointed. No internal recruitment processes were followed, only the Head of HR being given an instruction to appoint the person. The staff then received an announcement of the newly created position and appointment of the person in the CEO’s official communiqué to staff. The person’s

teammates and subordinates also found out about their new “boss” through the staff announcement communication channel. According to the bystander, it turned out that the new appointee managed people who were not only much older than her, but were also much more knowledgeable and experienced because they had been with the same organisation for an average of at least 10 years.

According to the bystander, the bullying in this scenario happened by way of shouting and criticising people’s ideas in meetings, by the bully reminding people who she was and who had brought her into the organisation, and by threatening to report colleagues to the CEO because she had a “*direct line*” to the CEO. The bully’s management style was said to be autocratic and controlling, with everything having to be passed by her. She wanted to approve actions and decisions made at levels much lower than her, resulting in many line managers being disempowered. The bystander commented:

*Many people had been there for at least five years and, as a result knew and understood that department’s work and processes very well. But because she [the bully] was insecure as their manager, she did not want to listen to what others had to say. She wanted things to be done her way, even if that way contravened the department’s policy guidelines or processes. If anybody tried to point this out, they would be side-lined, ignored or embarrassed in meetings. It got to be so bad that people were taking each other to HR left, right and centre. Of course nothing really came of it because the bully would run to HR first to report how bad the staff member was; so by the time the staff member went to HR to lodge a complaint, an opinion would already be formed about him/her.*

In the example above, bystanders made sense of the bully’s behaviour in what many termed “*personality issues*”.

As noted above, my analysis revealed that bystanders generally attributed bullying to a variety of societal, organisational and personal factors. For example, on the societal front, bystanders felt that the high levels of unemployment formed a catalyst to bullying in the workplace because many targets were afraid to leave their jobs for fear of ending up being unemployed themselves. The data analysis from the focus group discussions revealed that many employed people were frightened about changing jobs because they feared being vulnerable for dismissals in their new jobs. This fear is attributed to

what is commonly known as “the last one in, last one out” principle. A bystander commented:

*Even though people are unhappy and are being abused, they simply go through the motions. All they think about is, “I must bring the bread; I have to put bread on the table for my family. I will keep quiet as long as I get a salary and put bread on the table”. Most people we talk to in that [bullying] environment, always give the “bread on the table” reason for enduring the bullying. Also, most of them have been in the same organisation for years. That organisation is all they know. So many choose to stay with the same organisation in which they are unhappy than change jobs and risk the possibility of being dismissed or retrenched in the new job.*

The above comment paralleled the views of many bystanders who felt that people were stuck with their organisations because they felt they had nowhere to go. Additionally, many endured the bullying in their organisations out of a responsibility and obligation they felt towards taking care of their families. Lastly, many also felt that the high unemployment rate, economy and labour market were too volatile to risk changing jobs.

Bystanders also talked about the role played by culture, values and leadership in making bullying possible and more likely.

### **5.2.2 Organisational culture, values and leadership ethos**

Both groups of bystanders with whom I held focus group discussions felt that the culture of organisations, the behaviour of leaders, vis-à-vis the organisation’s values, also served as catalysts for bullying. When asked how they would describe the culture of their organisations, many bystanders described their organisations with phrases such as “*a culture of protocol; it’s a telling environment; you cannot challenge authority; you get told what you are allowed to do and what you are not allowed to do*”. Additionally, many bystanders attributed the prevalence of bullying in organisations to “*not having a voice*”. They believed many targets felt afraid to report the bullying because they had seen that those who did either ended up leaving because the bullying intensified, or if they chose to remain ended up toeing the line for survival. A bystander commented:

*Safety is a big contributor to the prevalence of bullying. If people feel safe, they will speak up. If they don't feel safe, they will not speak up. For example, if you exposed one person, and if that person is a bully, you are on your own, you are left on your own and then you are in trouble. But if reported cases of bullying are acted upon, then bullying cannot be sustained. That is, in an environment where bullying is not tolerated, it will not survive. Unfortunately, this is not the case in this environment; people are scared to speak up because they don't feel safe, because they see that no action ever gets taken against the perpetrators. This then breeds more bullying, which ultimately leads to a culture of bullying.*

Bystanders described a culture of bullying as one in which every layer of management bullied, because they emulated their superiors' behaviours and ways of managing. Bystanders felt this culture of bullying was more prevalent in working environments where bullying behaviours were left unpunished. A bystander commented:

*A lesson I learned from our discussions is that workplace bullying can become a culture of an organisation where even managers in middle management bully their juniors. I have seen that too, and they learn the behaviour from their superiors. Therefore, you may as well write your grievance procedures for as long as you want, no one will lodge any grievance because they know that no one is going to do anything about it anyway. So what is the point? Therefore, given that people do not report or do anything about bullying, many remain targets for as long as they are employed in that organisation.*

The above view paralleled that of the majority in both focus groups, and other participants in both the financial services and manufacturing industries. Cases of bullying generally were not reported because, as a bystander put it, "*who do you report to, because the most senior person is also most likely to be bullying others?*" Other bystanders spoke of a telling environment in which people's views did not count. In this type of environment, rather than try to intervene to stop the bullying, many bystanders went as far as advising the target to do what the bully demanded. Others described a telling environment as one that observes, and is ruled by "protocol" even though the protocol cannot be found in any of the organisation's policy documents. A bystander commented:

*This culture of protocol is not taught to new entrants to the organisation. You get told by people, "you can't do this, and you can't do that". People don't tell you how to behave or what things to guard against or about the ethics of an organisation. You learn them as you go along.*

My analysis further revealed that, ultimately, the culture of protocol breeds the types of people who did not speak out for fear of being dismissed if they did not follow the protocol.

Bystanders also spoke about the role the relationship between values and leadership played in bullying. They believed that leadership commitment, demonstrated through the actions they took against bullying and negative behaviours at work, were more significant than having policies and rules against these behaviours. Bystanders saw policies and rules as mere guidelines on how to do things and behave within an organisation. To them, the most important question was how to bring the spirit and letter of these policies and rules alive within “*the DNA*” of the organisation. Many believed this could only be achieved through adherence to, and living out of organisational values. Additionally, many bystanders believed that the success of living up to the organisation’s values was dependent on how leaders behaved. Furthermore, they saw values as an individual and personal issue. A bystander commented:

*Living the values of the organisation starts with the individual. If you are not living your own values, you will not be able to connect to the values of the organisation because personal values have an impact on the way we do our work. Values, and the way we express them in both our personal and work lives are about you as an individual. However, what fails in many organisations is that we develop these values, frame them and display them on the walls and that’s where it ends because we don’t practice them and, as a result, we relate to them differently. For example, almost every organisation I can think of has integrity as a value. But, what does integrity mean? How do you live it? For example, for me integrity means doing the right thing even when no one is around. But what is the right thing? We often assume that the values that are on the wall talk to every individual in the organisation. I mean, I come with my own values and integrity might not be one of them. My values might be to make as much money as possible even if I trample on, and bully people in the process; but no one knows that. So people assume that integrity and accountability are my values because they happen to be organisation’s, and they therefore expect me to behave in a certain way. This does not always happen. The challenge therefore is about holding people accountable for the way they behave, as espoused in the organisation’s values.*

Some bystanders explained that one of the reasons bullying happened in their organisations was because leaders who bullied behaved in a manner that contradicted



their organisation's values. They also linked values to what they referred to as 'leadership ethos', which defined leadership as the character or values peculiar to leaders of a specific organisation. Similar to values, bystanders believed an organisation's leadership ethos defined how leaders of that organisation were supposed to behave. Additionally, they believed that an organisation's leadership ethos served as a compass for answering questions such as, "What holds leaders accountable? Do leaders hold each other accountable for what they do?" They felt that personality issues also accounted for how and why bullying happened in organisations.

### **5.2.2.1 Personality issues**

While all bystanders agreed that people's different personalities contribute to bullying, some held differing views regarding the role personality played in bullying. For example, a few believed that some people were simply difficult to work with and there was nothing anyone could do about their personalities. Others believed that the personalities of people who bullied had something to do with their low self-esteem, vindictiveness, or need to control. Others believed that the bullies' personalities were influenced and shaped by their background and/or current environment. To illustrate the point, a bystander gave the following example:

*Let me start by saying this. We have these two individuals..., and maybe let me give you the background, for you to understand how this whole thing came about. One person was a general in the military, the other one was a junior to this general. And then when they came into our environment, into the banking environment, the one that was junior became the head and the one that was a general in the military, who was a senior, became the "junior" from the position he held relative to the one who was appointed head of the business unit. So already there was this bitterness that they carried over from their previous environment into their new working world. Remember, in the military, it is about command and control, so the person who was the "junior" then and now senior felt, "now I am in charge, and you will do as I say". Now when these two people came into a different environment and their roles were switched, the one that was now the senior started using his newly acquired power to "command and control" his previous boss. Essentially, this now became a game of revenge and showing the other who was now in control. So they would attack each other in meetings in*

*full view of everyone, and it was easy to see that this whole thing was historic, because they would make comments like, “I was a general and I will remain a general.” In response, the other one would say, “I am the head of department and you will listen and do as I say. You were a general there. Here, I am the head of department.” And it just carried on and on. And you couldn’t interfere, you couldn’t stop them, because they were both senior and the minute you try to intervene, you too would get attacked. There would be screams of “shut up, shut up, what do you know, you were not even there. Just shut up, we will do the talking.” And this carried on for three solid years! And we knew that when we go to these meetings..., something would be said and they would disagree... then the personal issues would come into play, and the shouting and screaming would start.*

According to the bystander, the above behaviour spilled over to the department and its direct working environment, ultimately creating a culture of bullying as other senior people started to mimic the behaviour of these two individuals.

Many bystanders equated personality-related bullying to issues such as self-esteem, bitterness and anger. A bystander commented, *“If the bully feels threatened; if you have what the bully aspires to or wants, the bully will make you feel inadequate and inferior to cover his own inadequacies”*. Bystanders gave examples of situations in which the bully made someone else’s life unbearable simply because *“the bully was threatened by that person, who many perceived as a better manager than the bully.”* In such situations, bystanders felt that bullies used their power to bully others to hide their low self-esteem. Furthermore, others felt that bullying was a result of bitter and angry people. A bystander commented:

*There is a saying that says unhappy people enjoy making others unhappy. So borrowing from that, I would say an unhappy person with low self-esteem bullies by portraying an image of bravery, boldness, and a sense of being in charge, whereas, meantime there is a little boy or a little girl inside who is so scared.*

Many bystanders also associated low-esteem-induced bullying to power; especially in situations in which the bully with low self-esteem was in a position of power. They also felt that such situations created an environment of fear and hypocrisy. According to one bystander:

*Hypocrisy arises from a culture that makes people pretend to be something they are not. I am talking about the victims, the targets of bullying. Victims would rather lie about the bully's behaviour or plead ignorance about what is happening around them, so that they don't become the targets. They would rather sell others as rats. That is, give the serpent as many rats as he wants. But what these victims forget is that one day the rats will be all fed to the serpent, and they will be the only ones remaining. Then the serpent would turn to feed on them!*

Essentially, many bystanders felt that the “*bullying net almost always closes*”, that is, even those that initially kept the bullying at bay through hypocrisy and citing with the bully, eventually became targets themselves. A bystander commented, “*It is a question of saying, ah anyway, I know my day will come, so I will wait for my day.*” Bystanders felt that an environment of hypocrisy created low levels of trust between and among colleagues because people began to suspect that their colleagues “*will do anything, including feeding them to the serpent to protect themselves.*”

Bystanders also talked about ego as the root cause of bullying, feeling that the bullies' egos and high self-image made them feel entitled to get their way, even if doing so meant bullying and/or pushing someone out of the way to get what they believed they deserved or were entitled to. A bystander explained, “*Ego goes with power, it goes with image, it goes with how one is perceived, and egotistical people will do everything to maintain that image at any cost, even it means ending up bullying or harassing others to maintain that persona.*”

Many bystanders felt that the different personalities that people brought into the workplace were the root cause of bullying and other negative acts at work. Others felt that bullying often emanated from personality clashes, or from historic grudges which individuals brought into the work environment. Bystanders also felt that bullying was often caused by insecure people in powerful leadership positions who feared being caught out and losing their position to others. Bystanders believed that bullies exert and use their positional power to hide their insecurities.

Bystanders also responded in different ways to the bullying they witnessed. The next section will address how they made sense of their role and response to bullying situations they witnessed.

### 5.2.3 Bystanders' role and response in bullying situations

My analysis of the bystander focus group discussion data revealed three main roles of bystanders in bullying situations, summarised in Table 5-1 (below).

**Table 5-1: Bystanders' roles in bullying situations**

<b>Role name</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Bystander perspective</b>	The roles that the data analysis revealed bystanders played in bullying situations
<b><i>Role 1: Passive accomplice</i></b>	A bystander that does nothing about the bullying he / she witnesses
<b><i>Role 2: Change agent</i></b>	Actively intervening with a view to putting a stop to the bullying
<b><i>Role 3: Target</i></b>	Outcome of role 2; Bystanders as targets

While bystanders did not refer to their roles as described in Table 5-1 (above), a few alluded to doing nothing about the bullying they witnessed. Many targets I interviewed perceived bystanders who did not intervene in the bullying they witnessed as being in cahoots with the bullies. To this end, I named this role, 'passive accomplices'.

Bystanders who made attempts to stop the bullying by intervening in one way or another were generally perceived by others as change agents. In addition, some bystanders felt a responsibility towards promoting civility in their workplace. Therefore, these bystanders considered themselves to be change agents. The "change bystanders" spoke about how taking an active stance against the bullying exposed them to being targeted, hence the role "bystanders as targets". All three roles are discussed in the following section.

### 5.2.3.1 **Role 1: Bystanders as passive accomplices**

A dominant view held by bystanders alluded to not doing anything regarding the bullying they witnessed. When asked why they did not intervene or if they wished they could have done something about the bullying, a bystander commented:

*This is hard because it was never so obvious to me that I could confront what was happening, because I thought the boss would have a reason and evidence to back his action. However, with hindsight, I wish I had done something; but it is this thing of I'm not directly involved.*

Other bystanders felt that it was HR's job to intervene in these kinds of situations. A bystander was quoted as saying: *"HR is there and they are supposed to attend to reports of bullying or intimidation. Besides, do you think I would want to jeopardise my job for this person when I have my own issues to deal with?"* Another bystander also felt it was better to stay clear of the situation if not directly involved, *"The thing is, whether you do something about it or you don't, you pay a price. But because you are not directly involved and you've got your own issues, you can walk away from it, and I tend to always go. So it is better to look the other way."* Although this bystander understood that she might, one day, also become a target, believed it was best to ignore the bullying and hope for the best that she never got to experience what the targets were going through.

Many bystanders shared the view that intervening might *"unnecessarily"* expose them to being targeted and to potentially losing their jobs. This explains why they were not prepared to risk losing their jobs and continued ability to support their families. A bystander commented, *"For as long as people's family responsibilities are tied to their continued employment, they will not be brave enough to challenge the bully."*

Others felt that bravery had nothing to do with not intervening. As one bystander explained:

*Even those of us who are strong, we are often slow to react to situations such as bullying because we may not think of what is happening as bullying. And then*

*you walk away from it and say to yourself what just happened, and where was I when this happened?*

Many bystanders considered their inaction as a matter of survival, above all else. To illustrate the point, a bystander made several analogies:

*Let me use prisons as an example because that is where bullying is rife. When you see a rape situation in prison, what are you going to do as an inmate? Are you going to raise it? If you raise it, you are in big trouble, mainly from other inmates, okay? So it is better to look the other way. This is the same in organisations because I mean, bullying is a different form of rape which happens in the workplace, and it is a matter of, for your survival, just look the other way. As long as they don't come for you, just do your work and go home.*

Overall, bystanders who did nothing about the bullying they witnessed felt that their passive behaviour was a matter of self-preservation, and a case of “not scratching where it didn't itch”. However, other bystanders felt a moral obligation to intervene with a view to changing the bullying status quo. I refer to this type of bystanders as ‘change agents’.

### **5.2.3.2 Role 2: Bystanders as change agents**

Many bystanders spoke about the active roles they played in bullying situations, all having in common a belief that they could do something, however small, to at least raise the bully's awareness of the impact of their behaviour on others. One bystander, a qualified coach, believed that saying something might end up helping the bullies, because they might not be consciously aware that their behaviour was considered bullying:

*For my sins I ended up being her coach and found out quite a lot about her (the bully). One of the things I found out was that she was bullied at home. So, for the most part, her bullying was done subconsciously, which is why she would say things like, “but I didn't mean to do that. Is that the impression that my actions create?”*

This is why the bystander believes in intervening in bullying situations by simply playing back to the bully the pattern and trend he is noticing about his/her behaviour, without sounding judgemental. He commented, “*Well, I just put up a mirror for her to see what I have been observing her doing; for her to see that there is a pattern, that there is a trend about how she shows up and comes across.*”

Other bystanders who intervened in bullying situations were not as successful. For example, a bystander who said she always interjected when she witnessed the bullying or any form of abuse at work spoke about how she was “*told off*” by the bully. She commented, “*The response I got was, what does this have to do with you?*” Another bystander agreed and mentioned that she was called a “*self-appointed shop steward*” when she tried to intervene in the bullying.

Other bystanders spoke about how their speaking up against the bullying turned them into targets. They spoke of being side-lined as a result of speaking against the bullying. Others spoke about being transferred to positions outside of their business units without consultation. Many who took action felt that doing so put their jobs on the line. The following quote from a bystander illustrates the point:

*In my case, I mean, Jane tried to bully me as well, even as an outsider, as a consultant at that point. She tried to use her bullying tactics on me, making unreasonable demands from me. Of course, I stood up to her and said no. But my standing up to her came with a price because one morning I went in to the office as usual, to continue with the programme I was hired to design, and I was summarily dismissed. Quite frankly, I knew that was going to happen so I was expecting it.*

Many bystanders felt it was impossible to eradicate bullying in the workplace, however, they felt doing simple things such as supporting the target or talking to the bully might go a long way in helping to reduce levels of bullying by bringing it out in the open and making people aware of its prevalence. All however agreed that there was a price to pay for intervening in bullying situations. Often that price entailed a shift from being a bystander to a target.

### 5.2.3.3 *Bystanders as targets*

All bystanders who intervened in bullying situations spoke about how the bullies turned against them. One commented, “*If you voice your objection, or if you challenge your boss or anybody else that bullies, you become a target too.*” One spoke about how he went from being a ‘star performer’ to being a ‘non-performer’ after he had questioned his line manager’s bullying. He commented:

*In one meeting there was a shouting match after I said exactly what I felt. After that, the relationship with my manager went south even though he had previously perceived me as someone capable, someone that he could rely on to deliver what he wanted. But, his view of me changed after he realised that I held different views to his’, especially about how he was treating colleagues. Then the bullying started, and everything that I said, everything any member of my team did or said, it would be shot down repeatedly.*

Thereafter, the situation deteriorated to the point at which, according to the bystander, members of his team privately told him to “*back off*”, saying the bully was going to “*nail*” him. What was worse for the bystander-turned-target was that his team also suffered as a result of the active role he took in the bullying. The situation deteriorated to the extent that members of the bystander/target reportedly began to leave the organisation. Those who remained urged him to just do “*as the man says because this is not going to work.*” He disagreed and commented:

*I could not just let myself just go along, it didn’t feel right. I needed to do the right thing, both for me, the team and my direct reports and for the rest of the team around my direct reports. Ultimately, for my troubles, I was moved to another position in another department.*

Overall, several themes emerged from the focus group discussions with bystanders. Firstly, a close association emerged between bystander inaction and safety from being targeted. That is, many bystanders who took no action in bullying situations felt it was best to leave things alone, because they were not directly involved. They felt becoming involved might jeopardise their jobs and ultimately their ability to provide for their families, because they felt they could be fired and lose their jobs over challenging a



powerful bully. Other bystanders who simply passively witnessed the bullying shifted the responsibility to act to HR, because they felt it was their job to do something not theirs.

Secondly, the data analysis revealed that bystanders who did do something about the bullying increased the likelihood of becoming targeted themselves, which explains why many chose to look the other way, perpetuating the depiction of bystanders as passive observers. However, the analysis also revealed and illustrated that bystanders are not a neutral force in bullying situations. Lastly, the data analysis revealed a theme of bystanders using metaphors and analogies to make sense of why bullying happened in organisations. These are detailed in the next section.

### **5.3 ANALOGIES USED TO EXPLAIN BULLYING**

Many bystanders used analogies to explain why bullying happened. I found the analogies to be so insightful that I decided to relate the stories as told by the bystanders in the first-person narrative voice where I deemed it necessary. All the analogies used, except for the ‘global economic system’, are directly connected to some of the most challenging social ills South Africa is currently facing.

#### **5.3.1 Bullying and the global economic system**

The following is a story of how one bystander made sense of how and why bullying happened in the South African workplace. She extended her sense-making beyond larger societal factors to global factors. Below is her story, which paralleled the views of other bystanders:

*Organisationally, the global economic system is structured in such a way that you have the greatest number of the so-called powerless at the bottom and a small number of the so-called powerful at the top; and that design is not incidental. That design was consciously created for the mere fact that, the more people you*

*have who feel that they lack the resources are at the bottom; the more you hook them into believing that you can provide them with what they lack so that they serve you; and you therefore feel justified to bully them in the name of profit and sustainability. So if you look at the global system, many companies, including South African corporations, operate within that system. Whether you have the greatest policies is neither here nor there. It is just like people making a lot of noise about the South African Constitution when it doesn't serve us, when it doesn't serve the majority of the indigenous people of the land. There is a way in which you must hook people in to make them believe in the system. What I am saying is that the hierarchy within the organisation and how it is structured mirrors what is happening globally and this, to a degree, shapes the interaction between people in organisations. Earlier on I was listening to the discussion about values and I was thinking to myself, sorry, what are they talking about? Maybe I am not informed or am naïve but I spend a lot of my time thinking about values given the state of our country today. When you look at us as a country you realise that we are too far gone and some of the things that we talk about like values do not have meaning at all. Values have lost meaning. So the question is: can the global system and organisations within that system be value-based? Is it possible for the system to be value-laden? So for me, the way organisations and the global economic system are structured thrive on inequality. For them to succeed there must always be inequality, and with inequality comes bullying. You need the bullying for the system to succeed and survive; and the success, unfortunately, is for a few select people. For example, the other day I said something about (which is not related to this but just to emphasise my point) publishing being a cutthroat industry, and publishing houses know that. They have to do something out of the ordinary to make it in that industry and I asked myself the question, "who is the real benefactor behind the publishing, printing, marketing and distribution of the Bible?" Those are hidden questions we have not started to ask and closer to the topic under discussion, we need to ask questions*

*about why people bully, and why is it that someone who is a leader and powerful can still feel so insecure? Where does this come from?*

The above story elicited the liveliest discussion about bullying among the bystanders in the one focus group. Several themes emerged from the discussion. Firstly, South Africa is part of the 'global village' and is therefore impacted by the global economic decisions and activities which happen thousands of kilometres away. This impact extends to all sectors and institutions, including the workplace. It is for this reason that the discussions moved beyond the impact of national society on what happens inside workplaces to the influence the global economic system has on what happens in workplaces thousands of kilometres from the world's power seats.

Secondly, bystanders spoke about the complex nature of bullying. Many agreed that bullying was not just between individuals in an organisation. They also spoke about the importance of promoting equality to minimise the prevalence and effect of bullying. However, many believed that it was not possible to totally eliminate bullying in the workplace without eliminating and/or changing the faulty global economic structures and systems which rule the world. They also spoke about the inadequacy of good policies and values, if not backed up by actions. Effectively, bystanders raised questions around whether progressive policies and legislation such as the South African Constitution and the Employment Equity Act were enough to overcome systemic inequalities in the workplace emanating from South Africa's history. The continuing deep inequality in the country was perceived to be a precipitating factor for bullying in the workplace.

Lastly, the discussions and data analysis also revealed that it was almost impossible to have a discussion with a few South Africans in the room without the discussions turning political. This was evidenced in bystander focus group discussions that associated the Cape Flats with workplace bullying. Reference to the Cape Flats seemed to be a way for the group to place and describe bullying within the political and social context of the South African workplace.

### 5.3.2 The Cape Flats

An area southeast of the central business district of Cape Town, the Cape Flats are an expanding conglomeration of low-lying townships of Coloured and African townships. The area is largely characterised by poverty, squalor and violence. The name evokes fear and danger, because many people in South Africa associate it with gangs, and it is within the context of this association that some bystanders used the analogy to offer a contextual explanation of why bullying was prevalent in the South African workplace. Below I provide the story, as told by the bystander who came up with the idea of likening bullying in the workplace to the Cape Flats, to provide context. Other bystanders immediately saw the link, and agreed with the association of workplace bullying with the Cape Flats:

*This discussion is interesting because the words ‘workplace’ and ‘bullying’, are not a natural fit and at first, appeared not to belong together. This is because a workplace is usually not associated with roughness, or the kind of place where you would feel unsafe. I mean, if you look at a building like this one [the focus group discussion was held in one of the top five Financial Services company in South Africa], you expect people who work here to wear suits and ties, and stockings and high heels. You also expect them to be highly educated with degree and diploma certificates, which make them professional; not only professional, you expect them to be civil. So you expect people in buildings such as this one to interact in the most civil and professional manner. Having the word ‘bullying’ in a place like this is almost like a misnomer of sorts, because we tend to associate words such as bullying with toughness, with gangs. We tend to think that bullying belongs in the Cape Flats. Yes, but then, organisations are a form of the Cape Flats. The truth is the workplace is a reflection of what is happening in the society. Therefore, the workplace, like is the case with gangs, is run by the big mafia (bullies) and in that kind of system there is always power coming from above. With the power from above comes the necessity to protect the interests of the powerful, at all costs.*

The analysis revealed the importance of national context in explaining workplace bullying, important since Salin's framework is limited to organisational antecedents to explain factors which make bullying more likely and possible.

### 5.3.3 Incest

Bystanders spoke about how, in an example of incest, a father or uncle chooses one of the girls in the family with a view to grooming her to agree to sex. They likened incest grooming to bullying situations in which targets are 'groomed' to believe that they are inferior and not performing up to standard, to the point of making excuses for the bully. Bystanders spoke at length about targets who were constantly told that they were incompetent and needed to improve their work and prove themselves. They also spoke about how bullies did not acknowledge the targets' efforts, even when they did something good. This led targets to believe that the bullies were right and that they were just not good enough.

As in cases of incest, when the 'groomed' girls feel unworthy, guilty and trapped in an inescapable situation, bystanders spoke about the targets who felt worthless and gripped by the fear of losing their jobs. A bystander commented:

*There was nothing that she put on the table that was good enough. Often, she would be told at 4 o'clock in the afternoon that something is needed at 8 o'clock the following morning, which meant she would have to literally work through the night to meet the deadline. Even then, she would not be acknowledged for her efforts of delivering good quality work at short notice.*

In the example above, the target's life was in constant crisis, largely revolving around the bully. The bystander commented, "*She unconsciously, willingly deferred all her power to the bully and was completely disempowered*". As is the case with incest, bystanders felt that bullies also 'groomed' their targets through consistent negative messages and abuse to the point where they (targets of incest and bullying) got used to and believed that the abuse and constant negative criticism was warranted. According

to a bystander, *“the idea is to make targets ultimately agree that they are not who they are, that they are not good enough!”*

My analysis revealed two more themes, in addition to the analogies bystanders used to explain bullying. First, bystanders felt bullying was one of a continuum of negative acts in the workplace, which they spoke of as being just the right place in which all the negative acts on the continuum could happen. They gave as examples sexual harassment, verbal abuse and any other professionally related activity that could be used to undermine people, their identity and intelligence. Additionally, they spoke about how some of the negative acts, such as harassment and bullying, harassment and discrimination, and bullying and discrimination, tended to go together.

Second, the issue of “motive”, often referred to as “intent”, or “intentionality” in bullying literature was mentioned for the first time in this study. Bystanders felt that the nature of bullying and why it happens depends on the bully’s motive for targeting a specific person. They felt that bullies invariably had a motive for targeting specific individuals and not others. They also felt that the motive was typically tied to a specific outcome a bully wanted from the act of bullying.

#### **5.4 SUMMARY**

This chapter has detailed how bystanders made sense of how and why bullying happens in organisations. Their interpretations were based on first-hand accounts of the bullying witnessed in their respective organisations. Bystanders evoked very strong analogies in describing the phenomenon of bullying in their organisations. The nature of the words used to describe workplace bullying within the context of the South African workplace, i.e., Cape Flats, incest, and rape, seem to have several factors in common with workplace bullying. First, in all three cases (gang-related violence; incest and rape) it is not uncommon to have limited and unrealistic statistics about their occurrence because many victims tend to not report these abuses to relevant authorities out of fear of what will happen to them if they report and/or tell someone. Second, in some cases,

the perpetrators threaten the victims to remain silent. Third, in the case of incest and rape, the victim may be concerned about how people may react when they hear about the abuse, because there is still stigma associated with these forms of abuse. Additionally, there is an outside chance that people may not believe victims of incest or rape when they confide in someone, especially if the perpetrator is a powerful politically-skilled person. Fourth, the victim may be afraid that they would be accused of having done something wrong to draw the abuse to them. Lastly, associating workplace bullying with such terms demonstrates the seriousness and emotional effect of the bullying phenomenon on targets.

Bystanders attributed bullying not only to prevalence to the culture, values and leadership ethos of those organisations but also to the factors in the national context of South Africa. My analysis also revealed that many bystanders perceived their leaders and organisations to be tolerant of bullying.

This chapter also articulated the role bystanders played in the bullying situations they witnessed. It was found that the way bystanders responded ranged from being inactive observers to active participants. Whereas bystanders are understood to be passive observers of bullying, my analysis revealed a significant finding in that some reported also being targets. Typically, bystanders who reported being targets were those who actively intervened to try to stop the bullying. The implications of these views will be discussed in chapter 7.

In summary, many bystanders felt that how and why bullying happened was a function of many issues, which ranged from the global economic, societal, organisational antecedents, leadership to bullies' personality, specifically, their negative self-evaluation and self-esteem. In the next chapter I discuss the organisational antecedents in greater detail.

## CHAPTER 6

### FINDINGS: ORGANISATIONAL ANTECEDENTS OF WORKPLACE BULLYING THROUGH THE LENS OF SALIN'S (2003) CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

#### 6.1 INTRODUCTION

The two preceding findings chapters highlighted how HR professionals and targets perceived and defined workplace bullying (chapter 4), and how bystanders made sense of it and their role in bullying situations (chapter 5). The focus and subject of this final findings chapter are the perceptions and understanding of organisational antecedents of workplace bullying by HR professionals, targets and bystanders.

#### 6.2 ORGANISATIONAL ANTECEDENTS OF BULLYING

Research question 4 asked what the organisational antecedents of workplace bullying were. In essence, the study's participants were asked to identify the organisational factors which they believed made bullying possible and likely to flourish in organisations. The study's conceptual framework developed by Salin (2003b) was used as a filter to what the participants understood to be organisational antecedents of bullying (see Table 6-1, below, for a summary of the study's conceptual framework).



**Table 6-1: Organisational antecedents using the study's conceptual framework**

Research question 4	Salin (2003b) Categories
1. What are the organisational antecedents of bullying?	<p>Motivating structures and processes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internal competition</li> <li>• Reward system and expected benefits</li> <li>• Bureaucracy and difficulties to lay off employees</li> </ul> <p>Precipitating processes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Restructuring and crises</li> <li>• Other organisational changes</li> <li>• Changes in management/composition of workgroup</li> </ul> <p>Enabling structures and processes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceived power imbalance</li> <li>• Low perceived cost</li> <li>• Dissatisfaction and frustration.</li> </ul>

Overall, using the study's conceptual framework summarised in Table 6-1 (above) as an initial lens, my analysis of the interview data revealed that the majority of the HR professionals, targets and bystanders' views of organisational factors associated with bullying were consistent with Salin's (2003b) framework. The factors that emerged fell into motivating structures and processes, precipitating processes and enabling structures and processes. Work climate and organisational culture were highlighted as key to creating a fertile ground for bullying. My analysis, however, also revealed themes specific to the South African context. In this next section, I first discuss factors which participants described as motivating structures and processes of bullying. Next, I discuss what participants considered to be precipitating processes of workplace bullying. Lastly, I discuss what they considered as enabling structures and processes, before discussing the organisational antecedents of workplace bullying emanating from the South African context.

### 6.2.1 Motivating structures and processes

Motivating structures and processes refer to circumstances that make bullying seem acceptable. The HR professionals, targets and bystanders made sense of organisational factors which make bullying possible and more likely to flourish by pointing to a variety of motivating structures and processes. Specifically, they felt that internal competition, reward and expected benefits and bureaucracy were organisational factors which made bullying possible and likely to flourish (see Table 6-2, below, for summary).

**Table 6-2: Motivating structures and processes**

Code name	Description of behaviour	Frequency
Internal competition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Competing for positions</li> <li>• Chasing hard targets to the detriment of collaboration and team work</li> </ul>	8
Reward and expected benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Withholding benefits due to employees and getting away with it</li> </ul>	15
Bureaucracy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dictatorial leadership behaviour</li> </ul>	2

Most participants felt that the practice of not punishing people who withheld employees' benefits made bullying seem acceptable. In addition, a small number of participants felt that internal competition also contributed to bullying. The fewest number of participants felt that bureaucracy, specifically the dictatorial leadership style associated with bureaucracy, made bullying likely. Bureaucracy and difficulty to lay off employees were not cited as motivating structures and processes for bullying in the workplace.

I detail each of the motivating structures and processes in the sections below.

### 6.2.1.1 *Internal competition*

The targets, HR professionals and bystanders I interviewed believed there was bullying in their organisations, identifying internal competition as a precipitating factor for bullying. Competing for positions and achieving financial targets ranked as some of the key sources of internal competition. For example, when one target was asked why she believed she was targeted she explained that the person who bullied her was angry that she got the promotion which she (the bully) believed she deserved. An HR professional-turned project manager agreed:

*It escalated when I got promoted to the project management position. I got promoted from HR professional to Corporate Project Manager and she felt she's been in the company a lot longer than I have, and she felt that I got the recognition that she deserved.*

The prevailing tough South African economic conditions were also cited as contributing to internal competition, and ultimately, to bullying. The unfavourable economic conditions demanded people to do more with less, while at the same time performance requirements were raised. I wanted to flag this because this finding suggests that “societal antecedents” should precede organisational antecedents.

A majority of participants across the three categories of targets, HR professional and bystanders held a view that “*bullying is typically associated with, or is perceived to be relating to poor performance*”. A quote from a senior HR professional in the financial services industry explained how this happens;

*There are very, very stringent targets and objectives in place. So what happened is for quite a while we had a very relaxed management style before these hugely onerous objectives. Now that we are in this economic and financial crisis which we have been in for a couple of years, the financial targets have become even more stringent and there is more pressure on people; and this pressure from management to staff members often translates into bullying.*

Targets also spoke about the impact tough economic conditions have on what happens inside organisations. One such reference was the impact of the declining industry on their organisation. One of the targets explained how internal competition manifests, “We

are in an industry in decline, so people are scrambling because turnover targets right now are very hard to achieve. So we find people competing and blaming each other.” Internal competition is not restricted to manager - subordinate relationships, but is also prevalent among peers. An HR Executive, who is a member of the executive committee (exco), illustrated this point when she commented, “*We literally have people sitting in exco and they’re pointing fingers at each other for missed targets*”. In this example, teamwork and collaboration is often compromised, and withholding information was also cited as a by-product of internal competition. Further analysis revealed that some of the examples of bullying shared by the research participants suggested interactions between two themes of the study’s conceptual framework. For example, many targets attributed internal competition (*motivating structures and processes*) to the restructuring of their organisations (*precipitating processes*). A target from the financial services industry explained:

*The organisation is going through a major review and there is a lot of jostling for positions. Over two hundred people have left the organisation; and those that left, most of them are people that have been in the organisation for decades. I am talking two decades; twenty years plus and many of them left without even a word of thank you by the organisation for their service. And for me this spoke to an organisation that was losing a sense of its caring culture that it has had, and that to me has resulted in the toxicity within the organisation because those that are staying behind are asking themselves the questions; “Is this who we really are? Not being able to appreciate people that have served this organisation for so long”? At the same time, those that are remaining behind are looking at positioning themselves for the new order. Therefore, part of the toxicity is around the competition for positions.*

The above situation paralleled that in the manufacturing industry. Further analysis revealed a relationship between internal competition and bureaucracy. The excerpt below, from one of the targets, puts this relationship into perspective:

*When I arrived at the organisation I actually experienced an incredibly weird experience. I thought I was here because they understood what I was able to contribute. The fact that I knew more than everybody else became a problem for the manager. The organisation is extremely hierarchical. It’s extremely regimented. It’s extremely micromanaged. It’s extremely bureaucratic.*

The collective view of HR professionals, targets and bystanders suggests external

factors, such as economic decline, influence and contribute to internal competition. Furthermore, there is an interactive relationship among the various motivating structures and processes and it is not easy to view them as isolated factors. Similarly, the research participants felt that rewards and benefits were used as a bullying 'currency', the term generally having two meanings. Firstly, currency is understood to mean a system of money associated with a specific country. In this context, its use is as a medium of exchange for goods and services, and therefore has a high prevalence. Secondly, currency depicts a state or period of being current or up-to-date. In this study, participants felt that bullies used reward and benefits as a currency for bullying by withholding the transmission of expected benefits to employees in exchange for functions they performed and for other milestones achieved, such as promotions.

#### **6.2.1.2      *Reward system and expected benefits***

My analysis revealed that reward systems and benefits-induced bullying included the withholding of remuneration and benefits, such as bonuses and allowances that employees expect to receive in exchange for overtime work done, and after being promoted. A few targets and senior HR professional in the manufacturing industry I interviewed alluded to peoples' expected salaries, bonuses, and/or allowances being either withheld or not adjusted with promotion, as bullying behaviour. A target in the manufacturing industry explained, *"I am getting a new position and I am going to earn what I was earning as a graduate. Why give me the position? Leave me as a graduate then."* The target further commented, *"You cannot say you are promoting me but nothing changes, no remuneration, no nothing"*. The same target mentioned that she was promoted to a higher position when the incumbent resigned and left, and once again, she reported having been promoted, yet, her salary remained the same. Only after she complained and reported her case to the HR Director was her salary adjusted. Conversely, another target cited an experience which, in his case, he felt he was refused promotion irrespective of how hard he worked and how good he was at what he

did because he was on medication. He commented, “*I mean, how you can say someone cannot get promoted because he is on medication? You cannot; it’s against the law to say that to an employee*”.

A bystander in the financial services industry cited an example of an instance in which someone else’s bonus was withheld because the person concerned argued with the manager, and/or challenged the manager’s abusive behaviour. This is summed up by the bystander’s comment; “*Then 12 months later the person does not get the bonus that they were supposed to get or, it is reduced because of that argument or misunderstanding, whatever it is called.*”

A senior HR professional in the manufacturing industry echoed the manufacturing industry target’s experiences by giving a similar example in which a blue collar employee was refused what is generally known as ‘sleeping out’ allowances. His manager instead reportedly told him to sleep in the truck. The HR professional explained:

*The story is as follows. We have a truck driver who is delivering our products. Obviously the individual sometimes will have to sleep over in the area of his last delivery because it is far to come back to the factory. And this driver said his manager refuses to give him sleeping-out allowance. And he says to me, “I did not plan to sleep out and he [the manager] tells me I must sleep in the truck”.*

A few other participants alluded to the practice of withholding benefits as ‘punishment’ towards the target. A bystander commented, “*Yet the perpetrator withholding the benefits was left untouched*”. Additionally, a few targets, HR professionals and bystanders identified hierarchical organisations as a “*breeding ground*” for bureaucracy and bullying.

### **6.2.1.3      *Bureaucracy and difficulty to lay off employees***

A small number of participants believed that the way an organisation is designed has a bearing on bureaucracy and ultimately the likelihood of bullying occurring. A senior HR

professional in financial services believed that a hierarchically designed organisation may lead to bureaucracy and bullying, even though hierarchies are not inherently bad. The HR professional explained:

*A hierarchical organisation is about chain of command. However, hierarchies in themselves are not necessarily bad. It is only the organisation's practices and management, leadership and operational styles which spoil the nature and concept of hierarchy. For example, if you are a manager or supervisor, you are automatically endowed with certain powers and influence that you will have to use to manage others. By appointing you, the organisation is saying we are giving you these powers and authority to manage others so that work is done and is escalated up the hierarchy. The problem starts if that power and authority is abused.*

According to the HR professional, how this power is used is a function of what he summed up as 'politics'. He explained further:

*The whole situation becomes politicised which is the way power is used to solve problems, but if it is used in a biased fashion, in a wrong way, then it becomes abusive; it may result in abusive relationships. So the way the organisation is structured, for example a hierarchy, could be fertile ground that can breed a bully easily. It may not always be the case that where there's a hierarchy there's abuse, bullying, no, but I think it can be a precipitating factor.*

It is plausible that no one cited difficulty in laying off employees as a motivating factor for bullying because section 189 of the South African LRA, 66 of 1995, provides basic guidelines and procedures on how to lay off employees for operational requirements. The LRA permits employers to lay off employees on economic, technological, or structural grounds. Economic grounds typically cover reasons relating to the financial management of an organisation, such as loss of significant business. Technological requirements refer to reasons associated with the introduction of new technology that may render existing jobs redundant or require employees to adapt to the technology, and/or resultant restructuring of the workplace. Similarly, structural reasons relate to the redundancy of positions as a result of organisational restructuring. The fair implementation of these guidelines and procedures is overseen by the CCMA, a dispute-resolution body established in terms of the LRA.

### **6.2.2 Precipitating processes**

Precipitating processes are organisational processes that act as triggers of bullying. These relate to changes of the status quo in organisations and often typically include *downsizing*, *other organisational changes* and *changes in the composition of the workgroup*. Such changes are often driven by increasing operational efficiencies and typically take the form of restructuring, reengineering and cost-cutting or saving.

My analysis revealed that many HR professionals, targets and bystanders believed that restructuring and downsizing were fertile ground for bullying. Furthermore, they felt that other organisational changes, such as moves towards flatter, decentralised and matrix organisational structures reduce the number of senior management and leadership posts, thereby potentially increasing competition and destructive behaviours as everyone moves to preserve the security of their own jobs. Lastly, the data analysis found changes in management and in the composition of workgroups as precipitating processes to bullying. Further analysis confirmed that widespread organisational changes contributed to confusion, fear and lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities, and created opportunities for the abuse of power (see Table 6-3 for summary). The analysis also revealed that even anticipated change caused abuses of power that resulted in bullying.



**Table 6-3: Precipitating processes**

Code name	Description of behaviour	Frequency
Restructuring and crises	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Aggressive behaviour caused by jostling* for positions due to restructuring or downsizing, as well as crises related thereto</li> </ul>	8
Other organisational changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Developing new job specifications to suit management's preferred candidates</li> </ul>	11
Changes in management/ composition of workgroup	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Positioning of self to the detriment of collaboration and teamness caused by changes in management</li> <li>Aggressive behaviour and stereotyping, as well as intercultural and interpersonal communication difficulties due to increasing diversity in the workplace</li> </ul>	18

\**jostling* captures the abusive behaviours which result from changes in organisations.

Participants spoke of how restructuring, organisational changes and changes in management or positions translated into bullying behaviours, and the use of the word 'jostling' vividly captures the manner in which such changes translated to abuse. For example, a target spoke about how people were jostling for positions, and how those in positions of power were manipulating job specifications to suit the profiles of people they wanted to put in newly created positions. He commented:

*My business unit right now is transitional. Right now everything is in the air and there is a lot of anticipation of what's going to happen once everything is complete. All people talk about is the fact that there is too much of jostling for positions and people combusting for jobs and roles. And those in management are doing new job specs that are targeted to suit specific individuals. So if you don't have special friends that can speak up for you, that can be buddies with you, your future will remain uncertain.*

The description provided by this target epitomises what was heard from those interviewed. "Jostling" vividly captures the manner in which such changes translated to

abuse, having its etymological origin in ‘jousting’, a sport in 14<sup>th</sup> century Europe, played by knights on horseback who rode towards each other, each with a spear in hand with a view to toppling the other to the ground. Whoever succeeded would be declared the winner. The weapons in bullying are behavioural in nature, as detailed in the next sections.

### **6.2.2.1 Restructuring and crises**

Restructuring entails reorganising or changing the composition and operations of an organisation, often leading to downsizing, which in turn leads to reducing the number of employees and activities unrelated to the organisation’s core business. Many participants I interviewed spoke about how restructuring and crises associated with tough economic conditions led to bullying. In addition, they felt that organisational culture, which determines peoples’ behaviour, was a contributory factor to bullying during restructuring. A target commented:

*Before the organisational review, I think what was challenging for the organisation was the culture; specifically the fact that there were many people holding down positions, earning a lot of money, and doing very little in terms of contributing to the performance of the income generating parts of the organisation. This created a top-heavy organisation with the bulk number of people in the support areas. This caused a lot of the people that were in the forefront of the business who were responsible for bringing in the business, for bringing the money, to complain that their bonuses are being given to people that were just sitting around.*

Others felt that management’s actions were going against the purpose of the organisational review. For example, a target explained that while one of the objectives of the organisational review and restructuring was “*to try and flush out people that are just holding up positions without the necessary skills to do the jobs in those positions*”, the problem was that:

*The whole process was being messed up by the failure of management to manage the process much tighter by checking and ensuring that the revised job specs are not being customised for the same individuals the system is*

*trying to flush out.*

The general view held by participants was that management used their power and influence to revise the newly created jobs emanating from the organisational review to suit their preferred candidates' profiles and experience. Furthermore, participants also held a view that those people for whom newly created jobs were customised also had much power and influence, which they used to threaten and bully those who thought of questioning the process. This perception was also widely held by bystanders.

Other organisational changes, for example, those in business models such as centralisation versus decentralisation were cited as precipitating processes for bullying.

#### **6.2.2.2 Other organisational changes**

HR professionals saw decentralised organisations characterised by headquarters and regional offices, or the 'centre' and business divisions, as fertile soil for bullying. According to HR professionals in the centre or organisations' headquarters, businesses saw HR as a service provider who must 'jump' every time they want assistance. The HR professional commented, "*What frequently happens is that we would get a request from a specific division, but often find that we cannot deliver within that division's timelines due to other priorities, and then 'we get it'*". According to another HR professional, the division's attitude is one of, "*you need to deliver this to me because you are a service provider and I couldn't care less about your commitments or priorities to other divisions*". Many HR professionals saw this constant behaviour of unreasonable deadlines to deliver from the divisions as a form of bullying. Divisions expect them to deliver at all costs due to their role as "service providers" of core and/or shared HR services to decentralised businesses. In such instances, animosity between the business areas and support areas develop to a point of degenerating into what one HR professional described as a "toxic"

relationship between the 'centre' and divisions.

My analysis also revealed that while most targets, HR professionals and bystanders, corroborated Salin's (2003b) conceptual framework of the factors which make bullying likely they also believed that the broader social, economic and political context contributes to making bullying in organisations possible and more likely. Participants felt that changes associated with transformation and employment equity were spilling over to the workplace. Of all the broader societal transformation factors participants saw as precipitating processes for bullying, race and gender was the dominant one. As a result, race and gender were implicated in all the other societal factors which participants felt precipitated bullying behaviour. This is hardly surprising since apartheid was a system of racial segregation in South Africa, which consisted of numerous laws that gave the ruling White minority the power to segregate and exploit the great majority of the indigenous people and residents of South Africa. This racial system subjugated Black Africans, Asians and Coloureds to an inferior status, denying them basic human rights and political freedom. Since 1994, the primary goal of the new government has been to *transform* the country politically, economically, and socially. Achieving this has required a focus on redress to ensure that the previously disadvantaged are empowered to be full citizens and beneficiaries of a new society.

Targets also associated their target status with being members of either the "out-group" or "in-group". In this study, targets made sense of the reasons they were bullied by comparing their own group or in-group with similar but distinct out-groups. In addition to race and gender, targets used other dimensions, such as cultural beliefs, sexual orientation, religion, and education versus tenure to make the comparisons to distinguish themselves (in-group) from other comparable groups, such as management, bullies (see Table 6-4, below for a summary of these social identity dimensions). The study's targets derived their social identity from internalising these dimensions.

**Table 6-4: Social identity bullying codes**

Code name	Description of behaviour	Frequency
Gender/race	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Treating people differently and unfairly based on their race and/or gender</li> </ul>	27
In group/outgroup	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Inconsistent and unfair treatment on the basis of positional status; cultural beliefs; sexual orientation, or member of one group and not the other</li> </ul>	10
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Religion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Unfair treatment based on religious beliefs and affiliation</li> </ul>	8
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Education vs tenure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Unfair treatment and behaviours that disregard people's education and experience gained from other organisations, in favour of people with long service obtained in the same organisation</li> </ul>	7

As shown in Table 6-4 (above), targets attributed the reasons they were bullied to social identifications derived from in-group – out-group categorisations, such as gender, race, religion, and education versus tenure. Additionally, judging by the number of times (27) targets cited race or gender as the reason for their bullying, Table 6-4 supports the view that these are South Africa's most salient social identity factors. Most reported incidences of bullying which were either race or gender related. However, it was not a matter only of the identity of targets and bullies, but also the racial and gendered structure of the South African society. Furthermore, it is important to note that even though my analysis revealed additional three social identity categories which I classified as (i) in-group/out-group, (ii) religion, and (iii) education versus tenure, all these categories were inflected by race or gender.

In the case of religion, targets felt that they were bullied because they belonged to a religion which was different from that of the bully. In the current study it was either being a Hindu or Muslim. In the case of education versus tenure, the targets, who were more

educated but had fewer years' experience, believed that they were bullied by people with many years' experience but with less education because they feared losing out on promotions, to the educated Black new entrants.

In the next sections, I detail the behaviours and experiences which associated bullying at work with societal factors summarised in Table 6-4 (above).

#### 6.2.2.2.1 Gender and race

Most targets, HR professionals and bystanders perceived race and gender to be factors in bullying, an association found to be prevalent across both the financial services and manufacturing industries. On racial and gender dynamics in the workplace, many participants spoke about the impact of transformation in general, and employment equity in particular. As part of the institutionalisation of democracy and creating a non-racial and non-sexist society, the South African government implemented a numbers of laws and policies, which required major structural changes aimed at increased racial and gender representation in the workplace. Both Blacks and Whites shared negative interracial interactions that they experienced as a form of bullying. One target commented, *"I am a White male, my boss is an Indian female. She is horrible to me; I want to leave but have to stick it out because as I said, I am a White male, where am I going to find another job?"* Conversely, most Black Africans interviewed felt that the workplace had remained White-dominated, despite the introduction of new transformation legislation. One target explained:

*You know, the situation that we still face in this country is that the majority of our managers are still white and they are resistant to change. So, White superiority stereotype thinking is still prevalent. As a result, more blacks tend to leave. Blacks are leaving the organisation more than Whites do.*

An HR professional in the manufacturing industry spoke about demeaning comments or behaviour relating to stereotypes of women and bearing children, and women's manner of dressing. The HR professional commented, *"You still find managers who will have a problem when a young woman falls pregnant and they would say,*

‘again’?” The HR professional explained that her company was male-dominated, and that the company had put in place several interventions to increase diversity in the workplace. One such intervention, she explained, was a Graduate Development Programme (GDP), which aimed to recruit more females and brought young graduates, fresh from university with no work experience, into the organisation. The graduates were allocated a seasoned senior person as a mentor, and signed a two-year contract. During the two years the graduates went through an accelerated development programme, after which successful ones were hired to permanent positions.

The HR professional narrated a story of a young, bright Black African female graduate who had been placed at one of their operations under the manufacturing company’s two-year GDP to illustrate the prevalence of gender-based bullying in that company. According to the HR professional, the young graduate, “*never really found peace*”, and:

*I think they were just bullying her because she was young and female and they happened to be male, and happened to be white. We have a few female apprentices who are coming into the organisation as electrical engineers. You still find a lot of sexist behaviour in the plants. For example, you still have situations where men would whistle and make comments at a young female electrical engineer when she walks across the hall. These young females, they try to tough it up, but it is not easy.*

Similarly, another HR professional confirmed that they encountered resistance from their organisation’s business divisions each time they placed qualifying graduates into permanent positions. According to the HR professional, they were often met with comments such as, “*you are bringing us these people and what they do when they come here, is they get pregnant and half of them are hardly here*”, when they placed Black African female graduates to permanent positions. A target I interviewed confirmed this when she commented, “*this is a form of bullying because I cannot be discriminated against just because I am a female. Yes, at some point I may want to be reproductive and have a child but that is not a measure of how I do my job*”.

Most HR professionals currently employed in the manufacturing industry confirmed that divisions and plants in which the actual manufacturing of their products was carried out were still male-dominated and females tended not to last because of bullying behaviours by male colleagues. Similarly, female targets commented that they had to work harder than their male counterparts to prove themselves. Most confirmed to occasionally working late just so that they could prove that they could do their jobs and be accepted. This view paralleled those of bystanders who spoke of the pressure women, especially those in successful positions, found themselves under to prove themselves, especially in male-dominated work environments.

Similarly, most females who occupied lesser positions also had their own pressures to 'prove' themselves by consistently putting in more than what was required of them. However, many eventually left their jobs because of the bullying, especially when their efforts and sacrifices to 'prove' themselves went unnoticed and/or do not make a difference towards stopping the bullying behaviours directed at them. Those that remained in their jobs endured the bullying and what one HR professional regarded as sexist comments. The HR professional commented:

*What got to her was she was not targeted on the work that she was doing, but she was targeted as a person; as a woman. Her boss would say things like; 'you think this is the fashion industry, you put makeup on and you dress as if you're going to a fashion show'... and she did not understand what how she dressed had to do with the work that she was doing.*

Many participants in the manufacturing industry perceived the male-dominated manufacturing environment as a breeding ground for bullying, particularly against women. However, some of the bullying was difficult to ascertain because many targets were afraid to speak up against it. An HR professional explained:

*The manufacturing environment creates fertile ground for bullying because of some men's perceptions that **women do not belong in manufacturing** (emphasis his'). You hear comments like these through the grapevine, in the passage, and when you try to address them [stories about bullying] you are told, I am here to work and I just want to do my job; but they [targets] are not necessarily happy with the environment because they feel that they are being bullied because they are African or they are bullied because they are females.*



Most targets and HR professionals confirmed that it was only in recent times that the manufacturing industry had started hiring women as machine operators on the shop floor. They were taken in as young apprentices with technical skills, but no work experience, very different from the previous manufacturing dispensation which saw women confined to roles such as packers. However, according to one target, these changes, i.e., access to positions previously reserved for males in general, and White males in particular, were happening in an environment which had not learned to accept women into 'men's jobs'. She commented, '*this environment is not really open and conducive; it was not created to accommodate women*'. Similarly, there was a perception that bullying was usually directed at Black African workers. An HR professional explained:

*In my experience as an HR person, I have never seen an employee; a white employee coming to complain about the behaviours considered to be bullying taking place in his or her environment. It has always been Blacks who would come to complain. Also the few Black employees who came forward to complain always reported feeling vulnerable and unprotected by the 'system'.*

In other instances, forms of 'upward bullying' were reported in which men reportedly refused to report to women. Upward bullying is generally understood to refer to a situation in which a target is bullied by a subordinate, as opposed to a manager or supervisor. In the one example provided, the HR professional felt the matter was more than gender or racial, it was 'tribal'. He explained that one black African male employee in the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) -based plant of a manufacturing company resigned when a female was appointed to be his senior. During the exit interview this male employee simply told the HR professional '*it is against my tradition; I am not going to be managed by a woman*'. With regards to gender equality and promoting female representation at all levels, especially senior management, one HR professional summed up the nature of bullying towards women in manufacturing when she concluded:

*I think we made quick assumptions that everybody's mind-set is at the level where we want it to be. We mistook our political freedom to mean people understand what it means to transform. We went too quickly into the numbers*

*game; have ten women, even if they are useless but have them. We did not say, let's look at areas where women will make an impact as a starting point. So we just went into a frenzy and then now you come across very young capable women in professions that were not open to them before. I am talking electrical engineers, mechanical engineers. I am seeing them come on board and I am seeing them battle with the environment because the environment is not yet ready for women. You often hear statements like, 'put them in HR, put them in IT, and put them somewhere else...'*

Further analysis revealed slightly different gender-related bullying behaviours in the financial services industry. It is important to note that, unlike the manufacturing industry, the majority of employees in the financial services industry tend to be white collar workers, hence the slight difference in gender-related bullying behaviours. For example, due to the Employment Equity Act, most companies target appointing and/or promoting black African females to top management positions. To this end, according to an HR professional employed in the banking sector, her company had seen an increase, albeit slow, in the prevalence of women in senior positions. This advent of more women in senior positions had, according to the HR professional, resulted in an increase in a different form of sexual harassment: *'what we are also seeing is that these days you get a lot more harassment from senior women directed at junior people than we have had previously, namely, from males to females'*. She explained further:

*We have a few 'cougars' running around. More women are getting into positions of power and they are abusing it; suddenly it is not the White males anymore. So these are examples of subtle changes that bring about new forms of abusive behaviour in the workplace.*

On the other hand, the ascendance of females to senior positions in general, and Black African females in particular, had resulted in unintended gender-based bullying backlash. A target in the financial services sector summarised her gender-based bullying experiences as follows:

*The new experience that I have had is with a male manager who is extremely aggressive, extremely insecure, and pays lip service to employment equity when it comes to women. He will make statements like there are too many women in the department, so now we have to get another man...Very*

*masculine behaviour, I think we were in this very room where he effectively screamed at the trade union representative, saying she must shut up because he was talking. He is extremely paternalistic. The way he talks to women is like 'hey, naughty little girl, go and stand in a corner, be seen and not heard'. Once, I was in a room full of women and the same manager said to them 'you might want to go somewhere else, but you will not go where you want to go'.*

Next, I address behaviours and experiences which I classified as, 'in-group / out-group' or 'them and us'.

#### 6.2.2.2 *In-group / out-group (Them and us)*

Several HR professionals described the emergence of a new trend in addition to race and gender bullying behaviours. This new trend is culture-based as bullying is no longer White versus Black, but is based on cultural identity. An HR professional in a manufacturing company commented:

*We had an issue in one of our branches where a branch manager only wanted to recruit Zulu people, and he bullied the people who were not Zulu. We even had two constructive dismissals where he bullied two Xhosa people out of the company.*

This view was supported by another HR professional in a financial services company, who commented, "*bullying cuts across the board because sometimes you have blacks who treat other Blacks badly*". Others also felt that bullying could no longer be attributed to any specific race "*given the diversity in this country*". However, there were still a significant number of participants who still felt that "*sometimes your colleagues will bully you because you are different from them*", and that race and/or gender played a significant part in bullying. According to an HR professional in a banking environment, the main contributor to the perception of race and gender playing an important part in people being bullied stems from most companies' recruitment and selection policies which favour designated candidates:

*Most companies, including the company that I work for, drive transformation in that when we advertise positions, we openly state that preferred candidates*

*will be AA [affirmative action] candidates or PDIs [previously disadvantaged individuals] because we want to promote equality and address the imbalances of the past. However, this is not taken well by some of the white colleagues who have occupied the targeted positions for a long time, and are used to a white-dominant work environment.*

Another target supported the above view when she commented that her bullying experience began when she was promoted and appointed to a senior position. She commented, “*according to them, I was appointed as a result of affirmative action more than anything else. I was seen as an AA candidate and somebody who does not know what she was doing*”. The target described her bullying experience after her appointment as one of “*lack of support from her peers*”; “*insubordination from her white subordinates*”, and “*continuous general disrespect*”. A different HR professional in a manufacturing company corroborated this target’s bullying experience when she related a story of a qualified and experienced female employee they appointed. She explained:

*Before appointing her, we did reference checks and received very good feedback from her previous employer, and the people that worked with her were quite happy with her work and described her as a good team player. However, when she got here, she and the boss were like cat-and-mouse. She would do everything, and diligently submit her work on time, but her boss was never pleased with her, nor acknowledged her efforts because I think the boss felt she was thrown down her throat because of her employment equity status.*

Many targets and HR professionals felt that much of the bullying began with the appointment of Employment Equity (EE) candidates, mainly because they believed the managers had someone else they wanted to employ instead. Moreover, many adverts carried a line at the bottom that “this is an EE position...,” meaning only EE candidates, in general, and Black African females in particular, would be considered. The HR professionals believed that in such situations many managers employed the EE candidate because they were expected to, and not because the candidate was their first choice; hence the negative treatment directed at the new appointee. Many EE candidates, however, disliked being seen as mere EE appointments. Targets felt that transformation facilitated their promotion and appointment to positions which they otherwise deserved and for which they were qualified, but could not have

accessed due to past discrimination policies and practices based on race and gender.

Both targets and HR professionals also identified behaviours which favoured other employees over others as leading to bullying. Examples of these behaviours include 'exclusion', which often took the form of withholding information from select people, typically targets, and/or not inviting them to meetings or other work-related events. To illustrate this point, one target commented, "*we operate in an in-crowd and out-crowd land; even our CEO refers to an 'A-Team'*", which is the group the CEO favoured. According to the target this led to a culture of 'them and us' in the organisation, as well as an 'in-crowd' being invited for weekend excursions with the CEO. This privilege translated to power for the members, which the 'out-crowd' felt they misused. One target spoke about a peer who had the privilege of being part of the 'A-team' by association. The person in question, in this case the bully, was married to the company's Chief Financial Officer, and so had power and authority even though she did not have the position to go with it. The target explained, "*We have a new group CEO and, for example, he takes his executives and their partners away on weekends and of course she gets to go, so she gets to undermine you at that kind of level as well*".

HR professionals also alluded to a new trend of bullying aimed at homosexuals, a trend which, according to an HR professional, was found to be more prevalent among heterosexual men in the KZN branch of one manufacturing company:

*We had a situation in one of our plants in KZN during the night shift, in the middle of the factory, where three guys held down the man who was allegedly gay and they tried to undress him to show him that he was a sissy... and he was repeatedly called derogatory names because he was not regarded as a real man.*

#### 6.2.2.2.3 Religion

Even though cases of bullying on the basis of religion were confined to Muslims and Hindus in the KZN region, which has the country's largest representation of Indians, I thought the situation was worth mentioning as a good example of situations in which individuals compared their groups ('us') with other groups to which they did not belong ('them'), with a favourable bias towards the former, and competing with groups to which they did not belong. An HR professional identified this form of bullying as unusual and unique:

*Other people are even bullied because of their religion, and/or use religion to discriminate against each other. One example, if I go back to when I was an HR professional in KZN, you had a Muslim manager who managed a department. The majority of the Indian fellows there were Hindus... and why I am saying people bullied, or discriminated against others because of religion is because this individual ultimately revealed to me and said he had been taught that they (Muslims) are superior to Hindus.*

According to the HR professional, the relationship between the Muslim manager and Hindu colleagues was marred by constant battles characterised by withholding information critical for doing the work. The HR professional commented, "*They would fight the one who would refuse to provide information until I intervene*". In this case, the targets felt that they were being targeted and harassed due to their religious affiliation. Additionally, targets and HR professionals talked about conflict from education versus tenure as one of the factors which made bullying possible.

#### 6.2.2.2.4 Education versus tenure

Many Black African targets and HR professionals felt that the advent of workplace transformation in the form of Employment Equity brought with it new forms of bullying and discrimination based on education. More specifically, many Black African targets perceived bullying behaviours to be a result of resentment from White employees who had been, and in many instances continued to occupy senior positions in organisations. Similarly, many targets felt that these managers with long

tenures in the same organisation were often less educated than them and that they had worked themselves up to get to where they were. Furthermore, most targets believed that many of these managers only had a matriculation (matric) certificate, the South African qualification for entrance into a university, and felt that most climbed the hierarchy ladder due to tenure, the colour of their skin, or luck. One target aptly commented, “*Yet, the people below them who were doing the actual work and interface with other managers were all educated to degree levels*”. Another target agreed and explained further:

*And another thing, as blacks we come in with formal qualifications to an environment where people have been here since the nineteen hundreds. Most of them, if you compare in terms of official qualifications, blacks are more educated and more qualified than their white counterparts. However, more often than not, you find that this black person, who is more qualified, reports to the person who is not qualified. Some of them boast and will tell you in your face that ‘you can have a degree but you are not going to be successful here’.*

In the preceding sections, the collective view of targets, HR professionals and bystanders demonstrated how race and gender was central to all precipitating processes relating to restructuring, which participants felt made bullying possible.

In the next section, I detail the conceptual framework’s two precipitating processes which make bullying possible and more likely. Many targets, HR professionals and bystanders also felt that changes in management or the composition of workgroup precipitated bullying behaviours.

### 6.2.2.3 *Changes in management or composition of workgroup*

Several HR professionals and targets identified changes in management or re-composition of workgroups as the main contributor to bullying. The reshuffling of positions, appointment of new people associated with newly created positions, as well as the side-lining of current incumbents, that is, people perceived to be aligned with the outgoing or departed leader, were seen by HR professionals and targets as

re-composition of workgroups. For example, when asked what he believed started the bullying, one target answered:

*My bullying experience started with the leadership change in the organisation. Soon after there had been a change in the leadership, I began to notice the tendencies described in your definition. From then on, there were some negative acts aimed at me. I used to work in the office of the CEO who left. The negative environment around me started to develop immediately after the arrival of the new CEO. However, the negative experience was not directly from the CEO, but from someone very senior in the new CEO's office. When this new senior manager in the CEO's office was introduced to the team, I got a sense that he had already formed some opinions about me, based on the fact that it was known that I was appointed by the previous CEO, and that I had a good working relationship with him. I am saying this because when we got introduced, his comments to me were, "oh, okay, so you are (mentioned name), I need to speak to you". Needless to say, it was downhill from there onwards.*

Another target commented that the bullying began after her manager, who had been a target herself, left the organisation. The target further commented that the person who replaced her manager was weak and could not stand up to the bully and that consequently directly exposed her to the bullying which she felt she had been shielded from by her previous manager, who stood up to the bully.

Not only did HR professionals and targets mention change in leadership as a precipitating factor for bullying, they also felt that changes in the composition of business units due to calls for more diversity and equality tended to lend themselves to the prevalence of bullying. Diversity-based bullying was seen to be caused by lack of inter-cultural and inter-racial understanding as well as stereotypes the different races and genders held about one another.

Lastly, the HR professionals and targets also felt that perceived power imbalance, low perceived costs, and dissatisfaction and frustration, served as enabling structures and processes which made bullying possible and more likely. Power imbalance, low perceived low costs, and dissatisfaction and frustration formed part of the study's conceptual framework's enabling structures and processes. The next section details what the participants considered as enabling structures and processes of bullying.



### 6.2.3 Enabling structures and processes

Enabling structures and processes refer to factors that serve as breeding ground for bullying, including a *perceived power imbalance* between the possible target and bully, *low perceived costs* for the bully, and *dissatisfaction and frustration* in the work environment as a result of these factors. My analysis shed more light into the nature and source of perceived power imbalance, and dissatisfaction with or frustration in the work environment experienced by targets.

Figure 6-1 (below) summarises examples of the nature and source of the enabling structures and processes which targets believed made bullying possible and more likely. The number next to each factor denotes the number of times targets cited the factor as the nature or source of bullying behaviour.

**Figure 6-1: Enabling structures and processes which make bullying likely**

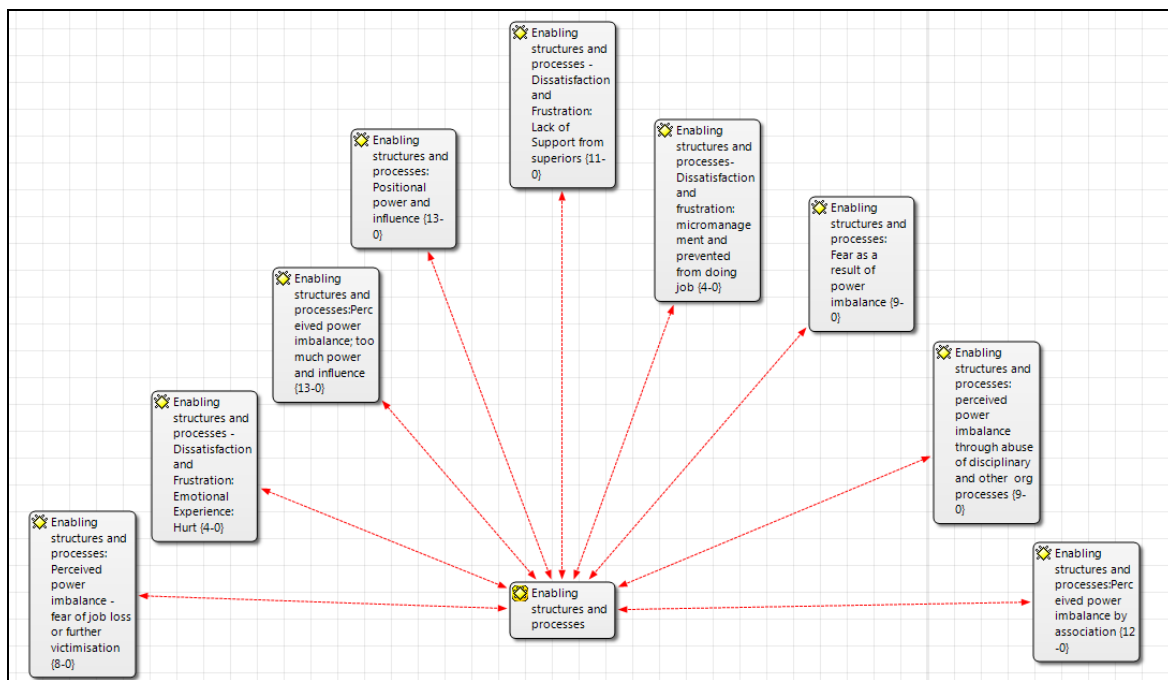


Figure 6-1 (above) shows that perceived power imbalance was classified into several categories, namely, (i) perceived power imbalance due to too much power and influence by the perpetrator; (ii) target’s fear of job loss or further victimisation due to that

perceived power imbalance; (iii) bully's perceived power imbalance due to positional power and commensurate influence; (iv) general fear as a result of power imbalance; (v) bully's perceived power imbalance by association; and (vi) bully's perceived power by way of abuse of disciplinary and other organisational processes. Similarly, it shows the types and source of dissatisfaction and frustration in the work environment experienced by targets. For example, several targets listed (i) lack of support from superiors; (ii) emotional experience such as being hurt; and (iii) being micromanaged, as the nature and sources of their dissatisfaction and frustrations.

Although no target specifically mentioned low perceived costs for the perpetrator as an enabling factor for making bullying possible and more likely, this can be inferred from what some of the targets said. Examples of these are covered in the following sections.

### **6.2.3.1 Perceived power imbalance**

Targets identified perceived power imbalance as central to their bullying experiences. They saw positional power and influence, as well as being connected and having relationships with powerful people as the source of perceived power imbalance. Many reported feeling helpless and defenceless against the bully who was perceived to be powerful. For example, when asked what he perceived as power imbalance between himself and his bully, one target responded, "*he has a lot of clout in the organisation because he has been brought into the organisation by the CEO*". The target mentioned that the same person with "*a lot of clout in the organisation*" had been involved in other cases of bullying or constant aggressive behaviour targeted at employees lower than him, and that on all counts, no action had been taken against him. This the target attributed to the bully's influence due to both his position and clout. Other targets labelled the bully a 'dictator' who was feared due to his influence. A target explained:

*His style of management is dictatorial and the whole department is a one man show to the point that even colleagues when they speak, they will always*

*mention that person's name. For example, we had a manager who will, always when she wanted something, would say this person in the CEO's office wants it. There is a belief that whenever you mention his name things gets done. So this has become the culture of my department, you know, everything is centred around him.*

One target summed up the powerlessness she felt against the powerful bully, who also had much influence:

*I just keep quiet because I want him to go away; because there is no point in going head-on with him. Besides, I have seen too many incidences where he had said one thing, it was recorded in that exact way, and then when he returns, it is something else.*

Further analysis showed that perceived power imbalance is not always a function of formal power differences, but can be a consequence of the context of a situation. When I asked a target what her position was in relation to the bully, she responded that they were equals, that they were peers. She explained that the source of the power imbalance was the bully's relationship to a powerful person in the organisation,

*Even though we are equals, she is married to the COO. Therefore, her power comes from the fact that she is the COO's wife. She gets to complain all the way up the ladder, which she has done on multiple occasions. I think the biggest problem with her is she has more power than her position because of her husband, and her husband does react when she is unhappy with people. We have got a husband-and-wife team here, the one is very senior which is the husband, and this affects everybody.*

Further analysis revealed different forms and use of power imbalance, for example, lack of support from senior management for those who report the bullying, abuse of power and authority that comes with a position, and too much influence. Furthermore, participants believe that bullies collude with management, which explained why reported cases of bullying were not attended to. This perception arises because in many instances the bullies themselves are part of management and consequently many targets accuse management of taking the side of bullies. For example, when asked why he did not report the bullying, one target responded, *"he has so much power and influence; everybody will believe him, so reporting him to your seniors meant nothing"*. Besides, the target continued, *"most of the people,*

*who put grievances against him, are no longer here*". The target further commented, *"...he gave me examples of the people in the department who put in grievances against him, who are no longer here. I think the message is simple and clear that if I do the same, I will lose my job"*.

Many targets do not report the bullying because, as one target put it, *"I am unhappy, but I don't want to lose my job"*. An HR professional concurred and commented:

*The problem is our grievance process requires that people report the bullying to the bully's senior manager, and in many instances, the bully and his/her line manager tend to have a close relationship. So there is no way the senior manager will act against the bully. Instead, there is a big chance that both are going to gang up on the target, which is why many targets tend to not be interested in reporting the bullying.*

A target who had previously reported the bullying confirmed this and commented, *"It does not matter how many times we escalated to his seniors; no action was taken"*. Another target thought the bully was so powerful that he believed he even *"bullied upwards"*.

Other targets described the tactics bullies used to bully, considering the manner in which bullies abused organisations' processes and procedures as bullying tactics. One target commented:

*Every time I did something wrong in the eyes of the bully, I was reigned-in in the most brutal fashion; I would either be called to her office; called by the employee relations unit, or a disciplinary process would be hurled at me.*

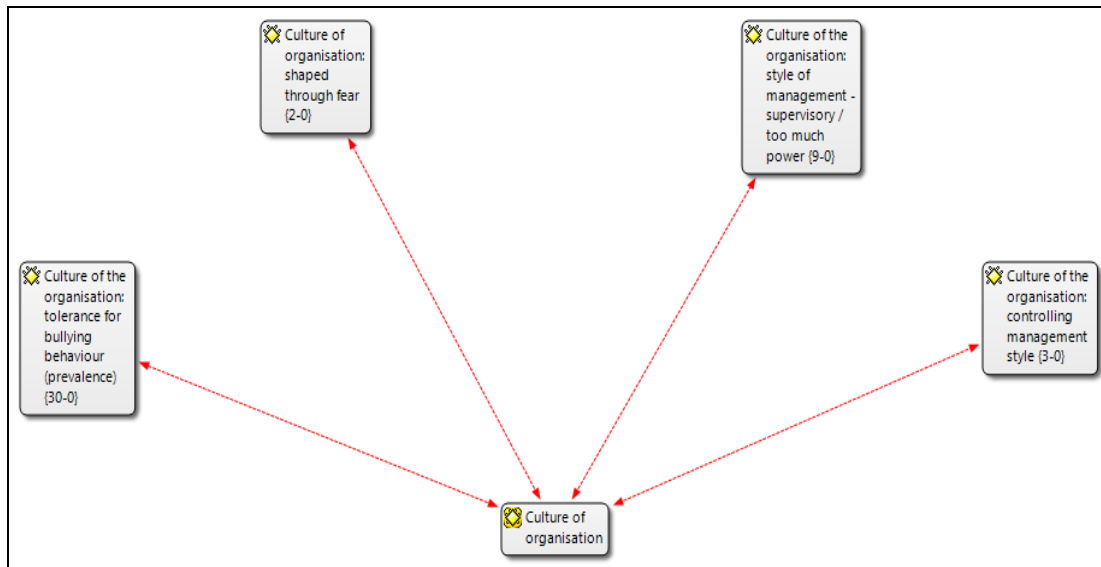
The targets and HR professionals also felt that the type of organisational culture and work climate in which bullying went unpunished made perpetrators persist with their abusive behaviour, because they perceive the costs of bullying to be low.

### **6.2.3.2 Low perceived costs**

Low perceived costs refer to a situation in which the bully assesses the costs of bullying as being relatively small. They are usually linked with large and bureaucratic organisations in which decisions about reported bullying abuses take a long time to be made, thus lessening the risk of the bully being caught, reprimanded and/or dismissed. Targets, HR professionals and bystanders felt that complications around what constitutes bullying and what does not made the perceived costs of bullying even smaller. Furthermore, participants felt the lack of action against bullies created an environment and climate in which bullying is perceived as permissible because no action was taken against the bullies.

My analysis further revealed that organisational culture and leadership style were used to explain workplace bullying (see Figure 6-2, below, for summary). Leadership and organisational culture received the most mention as enabling processes for bullying, though neither form part of Salin's (2003b) enabling structures and processes. Some participants felt that large and bureaucratic organisations in which decisions about bullies take long, and leadership styles that abdicate responsibility and do not take action against bullies, cumulatively lead to a culture of bullying, that is, one in which abusive behaviour is not frowned upon. Furthermore, my analysis revealed that in organisations in both the financial services and manufacturing industries, bullying is often equated with 'tough' management and, coupled with great results, is perceived and explained as a means of accomplishing tasks, and of bringing the best out of people. Equating 'tough' management with getting results was seen as contributing to the acceptance of bullying. An HR professional commented, "*People accused of being bullies often see themselves as merely meeting their organisation's needs and productivity goals*".

**Figure 6-2: The role of culture in cultivating workplace bullying**



When asked what managers felt about balancing managing people and getting results, an HR professional in banking commented:

*We did a dip-stick culture survey last year and one of the managers said to me; “you know what, people management on my balance scorecard is five percent; making money for the company is ninety-five percent. What do you want me to focus on”?*

One target described the culture of her organisation as “*a telling environment where people’s views do not count*”. Another commented that bullying was slowly becoming acceptable behaviour because the perpetrators were not punished, but rather, “*seem to be rewarded ... even if you try and go up the ranks, the manager is buddies with his boss, so how far do you go?*” Another target agreed and commented about the leadership in her organisation:

*They have got exactly the same style; not only towards their colleagues in their business units or divisions, but towards everybody. This comes through in the manner in which these people work with us and it goes down to the most junior level. This in turn breeds bullying because if I see my senior getting away with this and having that attitude and approach then chances are I am going to do exactly the same thing.*

Many more examples of a culture of bullying and perceived collusion by

management were provided. One example by a target summed it up:

*You know, the other thing people also have is, they have very aggressive behaviour. They will scream at you; they will shout at you; they will shut you down, and then they will try and bully you into submission through your head of department.*

Another target commented, “*Even the head of the organisation will scream at people and humiliate them*”. Confirming what one target described as a “*telling environment*” in which people “*had no voice*”, a target commented:

*There are many people who are unhappy, but they do not speak up. So a lot of people suffer in silence. If I speak to someone who is in the mailing room, it is because I meet her at lunch. I find out that there’s abusive behaviour there in her department to which she has been subjected for years and years and years and years and years!*

Another target described the pervasive culture of bullying in her organisation:

*I was not the only person that she bullied by a long shot. She actually created quite a bit of a bullying culture here led by herself and we have had several people resign because of the bullying. As things stand, we currently have a constructive dismissal CCMA case against her. We have also had two CCMA cases with her being cited as the reason that people resigned.*

A bystander agreed, and described the organisation as having a culture of fear. He explained:

*The culture of the organisation is be scared, be scared; we are scared, and that’s how things have been and that’s how things are and that’s how things will be. So in a nutshell, the culture is very autocratic, but in a subtle manner, what I call ‘educated autocratic’. I call it educated autocratic because I fail to reconcile how someone with that level of education, who understands the latest developments in management science and how change management operates, can operate and behave like that.*

An HR professional gave his own account of one bully’s use of fear to bully people to submission:

*He always calls for robust debate but, if anyone says something, even if it is a good idea, he will not recognise you for that idea. He will use it as his own, making everyone believe that he came up with the idea. Even if all of us know*

*who came with the idea, none of us would challenge him. People would avoid him because he screams and swears a lot, so people would rather just keep quiet and say nothing. He rules by fear. He never greets anybody. He would come in, pass you in the passage, and nobody questions that. When he walks around, people pretend to be busy to get out of harm's way. He uses his position to bully people. He creates fear by publicly humiliating people.*

My analysis revealed that one of the common threads about such leaders as the ones described above was that they seldom gave credit or recognition to anyone for doing a good job, instead tending to focus on people's mistakes and typically ridiculing those who made the mistakes.

Many respondents confirmed the prevalence of bullying elsewhere in their respective organisations. One bystander commented:

*He treats people with disdain...I wouldn't say I have witnessed general incidents of sparring sessions, of shouting or anything like that, but Mister C, he does that. I witnessed one of those situations where there was really no need to raise his voice at a colleague. He shouted at the colleague in front of everyone, in a meeting, because he felt that the colleague had not presented the report he expected, or that the report was late, etc. I understand that it is about performance and that if things are not done on time there are consequences. My issue is about the manner of engaging with fellow employees that I found was quite close to being defined as bullying.*

Additionally, other respondents felt that there was no respite for the bullying, even if reported. As a result, many of the targets confessed to not reporting the bullying when it occurred, and those who did said that nothing ever came of it. Others mentioned that they would receive responses such as "*this is just how this lady is, she does this to everyone*". One target felt that responses such as the one above, especially if coming from senior management and executives, made abusive behaviour and bullying appear to be the norm, rather than the exception.

Another target who received a different response, also reported that nothing ever came from her reported complain. She commented, "*We were called and went to the office of the head of the department more than three times, and nothing happened*". Additionally, a target who went as far as putting a grievance against the



bully mentioned being told by other employees that nothing would come of her action. She explained:

*Before I raised the grievance, everyone said to me “you are wasting your time no one is going to do anything about it”. A few senior people, who directly report to the executive, who read the grievance.... all, not some, all of them said “we are watching this one...” Needless to say, my grievance came to naught, even though I had referred the executive to the, I think it is section four of the policy, of the employment equity policy which allows me to raise the issue with him... and basically that was it, nothing happened.*

A target had this to say about the target whom the superiors said “she is just like that”:

*By the time she is finished, she is going to have a whole new staff where she can start the whole process again and bully them and manipulate them. And this seems to be a pattern that occurs from the time I have been with this organisation until now. She gets new staff and the whole pattern repeats itself, so ja, it most definitely must be bullying.*

Others described a situation in which the head of the division did not like being challenged, and preferred “yes men and yes women” in his leadership team. The bystander commented:

*I have examples of people that challenged him or one of his favourites. The story goes something like, they went to a meeting and the guy apparently was very condescending and he was very disrespectful and the one lady challenged him; and because this lady challenged the head, she was put on special leave. This is what we are told, “special leave”, but we never see the people that go on special leave again. We have had four or five people that had been on special leave and they never showed their faces again back in the institution. So the special leave is permanent and the head decides; it is his decision.*

Another target supported the ‘special leave’ scenario by explaining that one head of the organisation reportedly went as far as flouting the organisation’s recruitment processes to get the people he wanted. However, if after bringing the people in and the same people challenged him, they too would be put on “special leave” and, according to the target, once people are put on special leave the chances of them returning are very slim.

Many targets, HR professionals and bystanders also felt that there were high levels of dissatisfaction and frustration in their organisations, due to the pervasive bullying culture and leadership styles. These form part of Salin's (2003b) conceptual framework's enabling structures and practices.

### **6.2.3.3      *Dissatisfaction and frustration***

In the previous sections, my analysis has shown how motivating structures and processes; precipitating processes, enabling structures and processes in the form of perceived power imbalance and low perceived costs have contributed to 'dissatisfaction and frustration' with the working situation.

A target explained how a bully with much power, which he abused, contributed to dissatisfaction and frustration with the working conditions and organisational climate. Moreover, the bully was brought into the organisation by the CEO. The target commented:

*It is three years now since this person came on board and the level of dissatisfaction with this individual, which I pick up around the organisation, seems to be growing. The power this person has also seems to be growing. Now the only point of relief that a lot of people seem to be looking forward to, is the end of term of the current CEO which hopefully will also lead to the departure of that person together with the CEO. The comments we get from other departments regarding this same individual are very negative. This is what I mean by a negative working environment.*

Other targets confirmed the manner in which the bully in the CEO's office abused his power and authority, to the point that one target declared, "*Everything in the department, and indeed the organisation, aside from the CEO, revolves around this one individual*".

An HR professional who admitted to having been bullied by her colleagues in HR, spoke about how she received no support from the head of department any time she complained about the treatment from her colleagues. The HR professional /

target commented that the bad treatment from the one colleague in particular, and other colleagues in general, started after she had been promoted to a senior position. Her perception, she further explained, was that “*they thought I was an EE appointment, that I did not deserve the promotion*”. The target further explained that in meetings her peers “*would mock me, and the head of department would just look on...*” The HR professional / target also explained that as was customary before their management meetings, if someone had something to present at the meeting it was expected that the person would circulate the document to elicit people’s input before the actual meeting. In her case, the HR professional / target would e-mail the document for input, and she commented that none of her peers would send her the input before the meeting as is the practice. Instead, she said, “*But when we get to the meeting, comments and inputs reducing my document to nothing will all of a sudden appear*”.

Other targets and HR professionals also identified the lack of support from superiors as a significant contributor to continued abusive behaviour by others and to their increased levels of dissatisfaction and frustration with their jobs and working environment. Allowing the spreading of rumours of targets’ incompetence and the negative connotations of these rumours described by targets and HR professionals, was identified as lack of support from their superiors. “*If anything*”, one target commented, “*my manager’s silence on the treatment I receive from my peers appears to fuel these rumours*”. Another target shared his similar experience, but this time from his line manager, who was also the person bullying him:

*Very little that I do pleases him, you know, so I find that I feel as if I am in a trap. I am in a trap. In order to do certain things I need his approval, and most of the time I don’t get that approval. It is as if I am incompetent, yet, people are pleased with my work.*

The target described other ways in which his manager did not support him. The organisation that the target worked for had regional offices around the country, and the target’s work entailed working with people in the regional offices. The target said he was not allowed to travel, despite regular travel to regional offices being a norm

as half of that organisation's employees were in offices elsewhere, away from the head office. The target commented that this became a vicious circle, in the sense that he would produce a report about the regions which might contain some inaccuracies, because things changed rapidly in regions, and his manager would be unhappy with the outcome, and so on. The target's other source of dissatisfaction and frustration was the constant verbal abuse from his manager:

*He would tell me in a meeting in full view of everyone, that he could actually get someone much junior to do my job, and that the junior would do a much better job than me. And, the kind of language that is used in these meetings leaves much to be desired. Unfortunately these meetings are never recorded. All this makes you feel that you are worth nothing. This is why I say the abuse is verbal.*

A young target, freshly graduated from university who joined an organisation's GDP, also gave an account of her dissatisfaction and frustration caused by the lack of support from her supervisor. The GDP was linked to a local business school and candidates were given projects and assignments to work on, either in a group or individually. As part of integrating the learning with the workplace, the candidates' work supervisors and managers would typically sign off their assignments before they finally submitted them to the business school. According to the target, her supervisor did not once give her constructive criticism on her assignments, but rather would make such comments as "*this is nonsense*", yet, when she submitted the same assignment to the business school, the comments would be positive, supported by her getting good grades. She commented:

*First of all, each time, I always had to remind him several times to give me comments on my assignment. Each time I ask whether he had read the assignment, he would say, "no I haven't even looked at it". When he finally looked at the assignment, which would usually be a day or two before the assignment is due, he would look at it and say "ag, this is all nonsense; you must go start afresh. I don't understand what you're saying". But I mean, when I submitted at school they said it is great. But him, he would scrap everything, just to de-motivate me. I don't mind anybody criticising, but be constructive. His constant criticisms against me were so depressing, but I continued trying my best to try and impress him. Well, it hurt. I couldn't understand. I tried by all means to reach out to him. I went the extra mile in*

*my work to gain his support, show him that I am willing to learn, but it didn't really work. He was just not supportive. I even thought maybe he was racist.*

According to the target, she never gained her supervisor's support. She commented:

*I persisted and finished my graduate development programme. I even got the best project despite not getting support from my manager. And I mean, when we graduated, he was invited to come to the graduations, and come graduations day, I am there alone. He did not even say that he would not make it due to other commitments or whatever. He just did not pitch, while other candidates were there with their supervisors, and their mentors. It kind of hurt. Anyway, I went back to work and told him that I even got an award for top project and he did not say anything...*

Another target related a similar situation of no support from his manager, and when I inquired whether the target had reported the bullying to anyone other than HR, his response was, "*What's the point? She is protected*". When I asked why the target believed the bully was protected, he explained that there had been instances in the past when someone's life "*became hell*" after she reported the bully:

*Suddenly, her direct report who reported her was now performing poorly, and the micro-management began. For a normal employee this manager would send a reminder once a week. For this specific employee she would receive a reminder every single day. And every single day it would get a little bit worse with messages such as; "I have reminded you, now please note that I will take disciplinary action against you if you don't do what I am asking".*

Many targets and HR professionals attested to the importance of good interpersonal relationships between employees and their supervisors. Many targets' examples of bullying experiences illustrated how dissatisfaction and frustration with the work environment and organisational climate was connected to the lack of support and good interpersonal relations with their supervisors, and to behaviours they considered as bullying.

### 6.3 SUMMARY

This chapter has discussed the findings of organisational antecedents of bullying through Salin's (2003b) conceptual framework. The precipitating processes described the organisational factors which serve as triggers for bullying, which included organisational changes such as restructuring, downsizing and ones that might be externally induced, as well as changes in management or composition of workgroups. The last grouping of Salin's (2003b) organisational antecedents to workplace bullying is 'enabling structures and processes'. Salin (2003b) described the enabling structures as factors within an organisation which create a fertile environment for bullying to occur. This category includes 'perceived power imbalance', 'low perceived costs', and 'dissatisfaction and frustration'. The data analysis revealed that bullying is possible and likely to occur as a result of the interaction between any of Salin's (2003b) three categories of organisational factors.

Further analysis revealed how restructuring led to higher levels of internal competition and jostling for positions, thereby strengthening the motivation for bullies to eliminate "threats" and "competition". Additionally, the analysis revealed how leadership styles, perceived power imbalance, low perceived costs, as well as organisational culture created a fertile ground and nurturing environment for motivating and/or precipitating factors that give rise to bullying. However, while the study's conceptual framework provided a good model for explaining workplace bullying, my analysis revealed the importance of incorporating or taking heed of larger societal factors to provide a more complete and richer explanation and understanding of the phenomenon. In this study, the analysis revealed how larger societal changes, such as transformation and employment equity, as well as underlying differences and conflict among social identity groupings at country level, spilled into the workplace.

Although the data largely conformed to the categories in Salin's (2003b) framework, the findings revealed the significance of the South Africa's social and economic context as another important antecedent to the phenomenon of bullying and how it is ultimately manifested in organisations. In particular, the social identity changes brought about by

the end of apartheid and the government's focus on empowering previously disadvantaged groups, namely, Black Africans, Indians and Coloureds and women, fostered race and gender-based bullying. That is, the racial and gendered nature of the South African society permeated the organisational context in which bullying occurred, influencing the manifestation of the organisational antecedents as well as the nature of the bullying experienced. Implications of these findings and all my interpretations of the findings detailed in chapters 4-6 will be discussed in detail in Chapter 7.

## CHAPTER 7

### DISCUSSION - WORKPLACE BULLYING AND SOCIETAL CONTEXT

#### 7.1 INTRODUCTION

This study focussed on four research questions, namely, how is bullying perceived and defined by targets, HR professionals and bystanders? How does bullying differ from other acts of negative behaviour at work, such as sexual harassment and racial discrimination? What factors influence the targets' perceptions of, and feelings about being targeted? What are the organisational antecedents of bullying? The preceding chapters reveal key findings regarding how targets, HR professionals and bystanders perceive and make sense of bullying, including what they perceive and define as organisational antecedents to bullying.

The link between what was happening at the country level and the behaviour in organisations which participants considered as bullying became evident in the early stages of my research interviews. The link became more pronounced throughout the course of my engagements with the rest of the participants. Essentially, all participants attributed the prevalence of bullying in the workplace to political power shifts and to changing social identities in South Africa (Booyesen, 2007). For purposes of this study, social identity groups are defined as groups with which members identify, and derive their sense of self-concept and emotional attachment from that membership (Booyesen, 2007). The most salient social identity classifications in South Africa are race, gender, ethnicity and language (Booyesen & Nkomo, 2006; Cilliers & Smit, 2006; Ngambi, 2002), and race and gender was most cited in all the discussions regarding how and why bullying happened.

The concept of social identity is derived from the social identity theory by Turner and Giles (1981), one of the most prominent intergroup theories found to be most useful in explaining group identity effects on human behaviour. It argues that individuals tend to classify themselves and others into social categories (social identity groups), which in



turn tend to have an impact on how members of a group interact with those of the group to which they belong, and those belonging to a different group.

Not surprising, given that, historically, South African society classified its people by race and/or population groups, I found race to be salient in participants' descriptions of bullying behaviour. Additionally, participants also attributed the reasons that made bullying possible and more likely to social identity categories, such as gender, cultural beliefs, religion, sexual orientation, tenure, and education. Of all the social identity categories, I found race and gender to be most salient in explaining bullying. That is, many participants attributed the reasons for their bullying experiences to either race and/or gender. I also found race and gender permeated all the other social identity categories. Overall, the study's findings demonstrate that race and gender-related "views of the world" and lenses are still deep-rooted in the psyche of many South Africans. The study's findings also demonstrate how these racial and gender stereotypes and related conflicts spilled into the workplace in the form of bullying. This finding reflects the lingering effects of a society that was both racialised and gendered during apartheid

In the following sections, I discuss the impact of race and gender, as well as other larger societal issues on bullying to provide the needed context for understanding the main findings relating to the study's research questions. More specifically, I discuss the findings in terms of:

- relation to the influence of larger societal issues on participants' perceptions and definition of bullying
- how participants perceive bullying in relation to other negative acts at work, such as harassment and victimisation
- the influence of context, or the macrosystem on bullying, specifically the impact of these findings on Salin's (2003b) conceptual framework on explaining the organisational antecedents of workplace bullying.

## 7.2 POWER SHIFTS, CHANGING SOCIAL IDENTITIES AND BULLYING

The findings of this study showed how societal power shifts and social identities, especially race and gender, influenced behaviour considered to be bullying in the workplace. Overall, I found the societal context to be important in positioning and framing the study's findings. From the literature, I found social identity theory more appropriate for explaining and framing the meaning participants made of bullying, because it deals with, and explains intergroup relations, specifically how people perceive themselves as members of one group (the in-group), in comparison to groups to which they do not belong, or to another group (the out-group) (see for example, Ashford & Mael, 1989; Ethier & Deaux, 1994; Hogg, 2001; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Stets & Burke, 2000; Turner et al., 1987). Other than the recent work by Salin and Hoel (2013), there is little research on workplace bullying that has used social identity theory to explain the phenomenon. In their latest research, Salin and Hoel (2013) used social identity theory to demonstrate how an employee's identity, such as gender or race, may contribute to being a target of bullying. In other words, social identity theory was used as a lens for viewing insights into understanding why bullying happened, and why targets made sense of the reasons they were targeted.

There are at least two principal themes that emerged from the findings of the study. First, a majority of targets who were black or female, or both, considered their race and/or gender to have contributed to the reason they were targeted. Secondly, many participants pointed out that the top and senior management profile of their organisations had remained predominantly white and male despite changes in legislation promoting equal representation, and access of previously disadvantaged designated groups to these positions, and they believed that these white male senior and top management used poor performance and/or lack of experience as bullying tactics to keep promising black professionals from ascending to these positions. This finding conforms to the 2012-2013 Commission for Employment Equity annual report which demonstrates that the top management face of corporate South Africa has remained largely white and male, and/or has marginally changed to include a few blacks, notwithstanding the country's progressive labour legislation.

Many participants attributed racialised and/or gendered-bullying to what they felt was top management's desire to maintain the status quo out of fear of being deposed from their positions. Additionally, many targets felt that the bullying by white male bullies was due to the negative perception they held against Employment Equity (EE) appointees. Targets felt that their appointments were seen as not based on merit, and that this perception attracted hostile bullying behaviours towards them.

Other findings reveal that participants also felt that the employment equity progress was hampered by the prevailing organisational cultures in the industries of their employ. For example, they described the organisational culture in the manufacturing industry as "*racialised*" and "*gendered*". Many female targets described bullying behaviours by their white male colleagues as disrespectful and sometimes derogatory to them. For example, the White male bullies would make remarks such as "*the shop floor is no place for a woman*"; or, they would whistle loudly at the women each time they walked across the shop floor, or make disrespectful comments such as "*they are never here; all they know is get pregnant*". Similarly, when women resigned or wanted to leave, their reasons for leaving or wanting to leave were used as 'confirmation' that they did not belong on the shop floor, thus reinforcing the gender stereotypes which the study's female targets considered as bullying behaviour. This finding conforms to a study by Nkomo (2011), which highlighted the difficulties organisations are having in fully embracing employment equity and diversity of South African society.

In the financial services industry, the study found that many newly promoted African Black female managers were bypassed by their white subordinates and colleagues due to the generally held belief that they were incompetent, and therefore not worthy of the promotions. The study revealed that such promotions were generally perceived by many white colleagues as being driven purely by affirmative action, while targets on the other hand believed that such perceptions led to negative behaviour towards them which they considered as bullying.

The study also revealed widely held beliefs by participants that organisations tolerated bullying, a finding consistent with previous research which perceived lack of action

against identified and reported bullying transgressions as tolerance for bullying (see for example, Hoel & Salin, 2003; Salin, 2003a; 2003b). Moreover, in many instances, bullies tended to be powerful people, or people in powerful positions, and/or 'high flyers' who significantly contributed to their organisations' profits and/or 'bottom line'. Many targets were of the opinion that bullies who fitted the latter description went unpunished, or not acted against because of their influence and/or contribution to the overall performance of the organisations. Instead, what tended to happen was that targets would leave and those that remained would ultimately succumb and choose the 'safe route' of not reporting the bullying. Ultimately, these targets felt keeping quiet was the best thing to do since there was no recourse for reporting the bullying to HR because they felt that managers had more access to HR, as well as believing that HR was on management's side. As a result, many participants reported not trusting HR.

Although race and gender were the dominant themes associated with bullying, the results also showed interesting gender and race themes with regards to perceptions to bullying. Firstly, the study also found no gender or race differences with regards to bullies and targets. Both male and female bullies were found to bully across and within their own genders and race. Secondly, the results showed a new trend in which people were bullied for religious reasons and for belonging to different social identity groupings.

Previous workplace bullying research by Steinman (2003), and Cunniff and Mostert (2012) confirmed race and gender as salient social identities in the study of workplace bullying in South Africa. In both studies, Black employees reported experiencing the highest level of workplace bullying and violence, compared to other race groups. It is important to note that in the study by Steinman (2003), black participants were the majority, and this may have affected the racialised bullying findings. In a study by Pietersen (2007), no significant differences were found between the experiences of male and female targets. In the current study, although female and Black employees reported higher levels of workplace bullying than men and white employees, the findings highlight racialised bullying behaviours and gendered bullying behaviours, not just the race or gender of targets, as was the case in the studies by Steinman (2003) and

Cunniff and Mostert (2012). Although the South African Constitution and related legislation has outlawed any form of discrimination based on race and gender, the study surfaced workplace difficulties associated with subtle and unconscious manifestations of racialised and gendered bullying behaviours. This finding complements previous research which found racist undertones in bullying situations. While the literature on race/ethnicity and bullying is limited, research found Hispanic/Latinos, Asian, and African-American employees reported significantly higher bullying rates than their white colleagues in a study of bullying behaviours among US samples by Fox and Stallworth (2005). Similarly, racialised bullying was reported in different studies in the UK healthcare and medical profession (see for example, Paice & Smith, 2009; Quine, 2002; Randle, 2003; Wood, 2006). The studies found that trainee doctors with ethnic minority backgrounds were more likely to report being bullied than those of other races.

Bullying research on gender has been found to predominantly investigate gender differences in bullying methods used by each gender, and which gender was over-represented among the targets or bullies (see, for example, Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996; Rayner, 1997; Zapf & Einarsen, 2003). Little bullying research, with the exception of studies by Salin and Hoel (2013) and Simpson and Cohen (2004), has explored workplace bullying as a gendered phenomenon, a finding that suggests a need to explore the importance of gender and race in the perception and experience of bullying.

Common about the targets, irrespective of race or gender, was that they all reported having been bullied by supervisors or senior managers. Very few targets reported being bullied by peers with a strong connection to powerful and influential people. I discuss these findings, specifically those relating to the influence of wider societal issues on participants' perceptions and definition of bullying in the next section.

### 7.3 SOCIETAL INFLUENCE ON PERCEPTIONS AND DEFINITIONS OF BULLYING

Research question 1 asked participants how they perceived and defined bullying in the workplace. Figure 7.1 (below) is a summary of how participants perceived and defined bullying. The participants' definitions are consistent with definitions in the extent literature, as illustrated in Table 1-1, and Figure 4-1 of this thesis.

**Figure 7-1: Bullying behaviour consistent with bullying literature**

- Questioning the target's competence
- Discrediting and ignoring the target's contribution and accomplishments
- Emotional outbursts directed at the target
- Intimidation
- Humiliation - belittling, demeaning and undermining the target
- Making unreasonable demands on the target
- Excluding the target from work-related activities and functions
- Continuous criticism behind the target's back and in public
- Abuse of power by bullies
- Constant threats to discipline or fire the target
- Refusal of access to training or promotion opportunities
- Taking credit for work performed by the target
- Not taking responsibility for own (bully's) mistakes and blaming the target instead
- Withholding of expected rewards and benefits

While the participants' definition is consistent with extant literature, including Salin's (2003b) framework, important differences in how they perceived and defined bullying were found. Firstly, the findings reveal that they made a distinction between the nature of bullying (bullying behaviours) and bullying tactics. They believed the distinguishing factor between the two was the 'intent' behind the tactics used. Participants felt that there was always a goal, or an end in mind, behind the bullies' selection of their targets.

These goals ranged from discrediting the target by accusing him/her of non-performance, to pushing him/her out of the organisation through disciplinary processes for ‘transgressions’ that did not warrant such drastic acts, and/or putting targets on ‘special leave’.

Secondly, another finding pointed to how major transformational changes, including shifts in political power in South Africa, spilled into the workplace. More specifically, changes in legislation towards the empowerment of all in general, and African Blacks and females in particular, were associated with the reasons bullying happened in the workplace. This finding supports a study by Booysen (2007) which demonstrated the impact of the South African societal changes, such as changes in legislation to empower all in organisations. The impact of social identity on bullying is at the heart of the findings for the third research question.

The study also found that while participants confirmed the prevalence of bullying in their organisations, many reported finding it still difficult to associate what was happening with bullying. Some of the targets preferred to use alternative terms, such as ‘injustice’ and ‘unfair labour practice’ and the term ‘bullying’ appeared to carry a stigma of weakness, which explains why some participants appeared uncomfortable in being associated with the term. The study also found that the alternative terms used by participants to define bullying had a South African nuance. For example, it could be argued that the use of the term “injustice” in reference to bullying is steeped in an apartheid past characterised by racially-based injustices. This finding is similar to those in studies that suggest variations in how different societies see the concept (see for example, Davenport, Schwartz & Elliot, 2000; Einarsen et al., 2003; Leymann, 1990; Namie & Namie, 2000; Rayner et al., 2002; Salin, 2003b).

The study also revealed how participants readily associated bullying with schools, and not the workplace. It was only after I had provided the study’s operational definition that participants began to believe that bullying did, and does exist in their workplace. Many participants also reported finding bullying a difficult and complex to define and grasp. For example, a few attributed what others considered as bullying to a tough approach

towards managing performance and/or achievement of onerous performance targets. Another complexity emerged around what they perceived as similarities and/or differences between bullying and other acts of negative behaviour at work. It is important to note that although research question 2 asked how bullying differed from other negative acts at work, the comparison became one between bullying and harassment in general, and sexual harassment in particular. In the next section, I discuss workplace bullying and sexual harassment in relation to views of the participants and how these have been supported by literature.

#### **7.4 BULLYING AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT**

Although research question 2 asked about other types of negative acts at work, participants reduced and narrowed the discussions to bullying and sexual harassment. The discussions revealed several findings, which include (i) how participants perceived and defined sexual harassment; (ii) sexual harassment is much more evolved and generally understood by all participants. Additionally, all companies represented in the study had sexual harassment policies; (iii) the emergence of two schools of thought regarding sexual harassment and bullying, and (iv) the role of social identity as the basis for bullying and/or sexual harassment.

In the course of my engagements with participants around this research question, it was evident that harassment and sexual harassment were used interchangeably. However, it soon emerged that what participants were really talking about was sexual harassment, evidenced in the manner in which participants defined harassment. For example, behaviour which participants considered harassment included touching a colleague (usually a female colleague) in an inappropriate area or manner, or propositioning her for sex by making suggestive comments. The participants' basic premise of harassment was that "harassment is gender discrimination".

While none of the companies with which the participants were employed had bullying policies, all had sexual harassment policies. Many employees also confirmed



knowledge of the procedures to follow in the event of being sexually harassed, or witnessing someone who was harassed. The first step typically entailed reporting the incident to HR.

Further analysis of the similarities or differences between workplace bullying and sexual harassment revealed two main schools of thought. First, bullying was seen as an umbrella term which incorporated other negative acts at work, including harassment. The conflation of bullying with harassment is attributed to the absence of a universally agreed definition of bullying (Rayner et al., 1999). Similarly, Simpson and Cohen (2004) attribute this conflation to the limited or lack of research with a focus on the difference and/or interrelationship between workplace bullying and forms of workplace harassment. Previous research shows that studies tend to classify both phenomena under one umbrella term of either violence, or organisational violation (see for example Crawford, 1999; Hearn & Parkin, 2001). In the current study, the conflation of workplace bullying and harassment could be attributed to the guidelines on harassment provided by the CCMA, which cites bullying as a type or form of harassment.

The second school of thought holds a view that bullying is different from other negative acts at work, especially harassment. The main reason for this distinction appeared to have been the difficulty in identifying and precisely defining bullying. As shown in chapter 4, Table 4-2 of this thesis, other differences include persistence, source of power, and key organisational factors. Participants who subscribed to this school of thought also held a view that bullying was difficult to detect and identify or address, whereas harassment was easy to identify and address. With this in mind, participants viewed the impact of bullying as being much more severe than harassment because they believed it could carry on for a long time without being detected, recognised or addressed.

The study's finding which associates bullying with persistence, that is, not once-off conflict, involvement of power abuse, and organisational factors such as change in management / leadership, restructuring, work environment and organisational culture, is consistent with what previous research on the antecedents of bullying have found. The

way in which participants defined sexual harassment in attempting to distinguish it from bullying was also consistent with harassment literature drawn from feminist theory within the broader framework of gendered power relations (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998; Calás & Smircich, 2009; Ely & Padavic, 2007). The literature on harassment confirms sexual harassment as gender-based discrimination (Schneider, Pryor & Fitzgerald, 2011).

The idea of sexual harassment as gender-based discrimination was popularised in the USA in 1980 when the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) issued legal guidelines and policy definitions of sexual harassment (Schneider et al., 2011:245) which defined sexual harassment as “(1) unwelcome sex-or gender-related behavior that creates a *hostile environment* and (2) *quid pro quo* behaviors, where the unwelcome behavior becomes a term or condition of employment or advancement”. In the current study, participants believe not only that sexual harassment was gender-based, but also that most targets tended to be women and the perpetrators men, a finding consistent with that in a study by Illies et al. (2003). The study also professed that 58% of women were most likely to encounter sexual harassment during their working lives (Illies et al., 2003).

Despite the divergent views on whether bullying differed from other negative acts at work, such as sexual harassment, there are overlaps and interrelationships between the two negative workplace behaviours. For example, both involve abuse of power, and both cause discomfort on the part of the targets. Additionally, it is enough for a target to feel bullied and/or sexually harassed for the behaviour to be deemed bullying or harassment. This relates to social identity factors, which influence targets’ perceptions of, and feelings of being targeted.

## **7.5 SOCIAL IDENTITY AND TARGETS’ PERCEPTIONS OF BEING BULLIED**

Research question 3, which asked targets to identify and explain their perceptions of and feelings about being targeted brought issues of social identity and workplace

bullying to the fore. The targets' bullying stories demonstrate how political power shifts at the national level influenced and shaped their perceptions and feelings of being targeted. Many targets felt they were targeted because of their social identity, most notably race and gender.

A recurring theme from answers to research question 3 was that many targets began to perceive themselves less as distinctive individuals in their own right and more as extensions and representatives of a prototypical (in this study gender, race, education, religion) social group member. This finding conforms to the notion of self-categorisation in social identity theory, and with what Haslam (2001) and Hogg and Terry (2000) refer to as the *process of depersonalisation*. According to Hogg and Terry (2000), prototypes or depersonalisation, or membership of a social group, inform the identity of individuals and where they fit in.

Participants interpreted their bullying experiences from which they derived reasons they were targeted from the social groups to which they belonged. Essentially, participants associated their target status with being members of either the “in-group” or “out-group”. I use the generic categorisation to make a distinction between how participants categorised themselves, typically associating the former group with bullies, management or any grouping they did not categorise themselves as being members of, and the latter with the general employees, including targets. Targets believed they were treated differently and unfairly, based on their social identity and where they belonged in the continuum.

In the case of religion, targets felt that they were bullied because they belonged to a religion which was different from that of the bully, whilst in the case of education versus tenure the targets who were more educated but had fewer years' experience believed that they were bullied by less well educated people but with more years' experience, because they feared losing out on promotions to the educated Black new entrants. This finding complements a study by Nkomo (2011:219), which found fear by white employees to be “centred in the belief that organisations were valuing blacks with formal qualifications over highly experienced whites”. Many targets believed that their White

colleagues regarded the practice of promoting and placing Black African employees into senior positions on the basis of their education and race, as unfair. While some Whites may not be as 'degreed' as their Black counterparts they felt they had earned their positions through their many years of experience. On the other hand, Blacks felt their education qualified them for access to higher jobs and promotions. Participants saw these divergent views between the racial groups as one of the significant sources of bullying behaviours towards them.

## **7.6 THE ROLE OF SOCIETAL CONTEXT**

Research question 4, which asked participants what they considered to be organisational antecedents of workplace bullying, revealed that the majority of targets, HR professionals and bystanders' views of the organisational factors they associated with bullying, supported Salin's (2003b) conceptual framework. In addition, work climate and organisational culture were also highlighted as key to creating a fertile ground for bullying. This finding complements the preeminent research by Brodsky (1976), which found bullying and harassment thrived in cultures in which these acts were left unpunished, thereby making it seem permissible and acceptable to bully or harass people. Additionally, similar to research by O'Moore, (2000), Salin, 2003a, and Vartia, (1996), internal competition, organisations' reward systems and politicised organisational climates were found to be organisational antecedents of bullying. Previous studies also found dissatisfaction and frustration with working conditions and organisational climate to be fertile ground for bullying (see for example, Einarsen et al., 1994; Vartia, 1996; Zapf et al., 1996). Additionally, research by Klein (1996) revealed a link between performance evaluations and performance bonuses based on the quantity of production or financial targets and the negative effect on team work and group cohesion.

In the current study, the prevailing tough economic conditions, coupled with stringent financial performance targets, were found to contribute to bullying. The findings indicate

that leaders focussed more on achieving stretched performance targets and less on 'how' these financial targets were achieved. In this study, organisations were found to place a high premium on achieving results, and by implication, less on 'how' people were treated in the process of achieving the goals. Participants felt this made bullying not only possible but an accepted way of doing things.

Other findings revealed that bullying was a function of the interaction between Salin's (2003b) structures and processes within an organisation, and these factors did not occur in a linear fashion. Therefore, the existence of any one or two of the processes was found to have contributed to an environment that nurtured bullying. The rest of research question 4 findings also complemented previous studies which found cost-cutting, restructuring and reengineering to be substantially related to increased levels of hostility and aggression (see for example, Baron & Neuman, 1996; Einarsen, 1999; Hoel & Cooper, 2000; Liefoghe & MacDavey, 2001; McCarthy, 1996; Sheehan, 1996; Sheehan, 1999; Steinman, 2007; and Quinlan, 2003). In this study, restructuring, downsizing and reengineering were found to threaten employees' job security and increase exposure to bullying. The finding complements previous research by Quinlan (2007:3), which successfully linked the effects of restructuring and downsizing to "poorer mental health outcomes, bullying and other forms of occupational violence".

Another key finding showed how the arrival of new managers led to competitive behaviour as employees scrambled to position themselves favourably with the new manager. This finding complements previous research which showed how changes in the composition of workgroups, such as management and leadership change, increased workplace diversity in terms of gender, race and ethnicity, have been associated with increased levels of workplace aggression (Baron & Neuman, 1996).

Although the findings corroborate Salin's (2003b) conceptual framework, they also extend the framework in important ways. First, Salin's (2003b) framework focusses on motivating and precipitating processes and enabling structures which trigger bullying in organisations. In addition to organisational factors, the current study has revealed the role of context, specifically larger societal factors, in triggering bullying in the workplace.

In the case of South Africa, the social, economic and political transformations were cited as precipitating factors for bullying in the workplace. Second, the classification of bullying players into discrete categories may be misguided. Findings in the present research suggest that the simple depiction of players in bullying and studying them separately limits a full understanding of how bullying happens. The literature distinctly classifies players in bullying situations into target (victim), bully and bystander. The term 'target' is used to define employees who are bullied, and targets are generally depicted as powerless against the bully. The bully is the perpetrator, and bystanders on the other hand are employees who witness the bullying but are not bullied themselves. Bystanders are also typically depicted as powerless against bullying situations they witness. Bullying research tends to study these players separately. In this study, several HR professionals and bystanders reported being bullied themselves, and this goes against the manner in which the extant literature in workplace bullying approaches the study of bullying. To accommodate the 'anomaly' of participants being both bystanders, third party respondents (HR professionals) and targets, I set up separate interviews with HR professionals and bystanders who also identified themselves as targets.

The study also revealed that the depiction of targets as passive, powerless recipients of bullying behaviour was more complex than the bullying literature suggests. While some targets passively 'received' the bullying, many resisted it by asking for clarification about what the bully wanted, by trying to do more to impress the bully, or by asking to be transferred to other business units, and, in rare instances, even confront the bully. If all else failed, many opted to resign and leave the organisation.

Few studies show individuals as being more than one party in bullying situations. Ireland and Snowden (2002) and Jennifer et al. (2003) show individuals who reported having been both targets and perpetrators. Even fewer studies show bystanders as targets, as they are different from either targets or bullies because they have control over the decision as to whether or not to intervene in bullying situations, despite being depicted as helpless observers. Generally, the literature defines a bystander as someone who purposefully ignores the bullying entirely, witnesses it and chooses not to

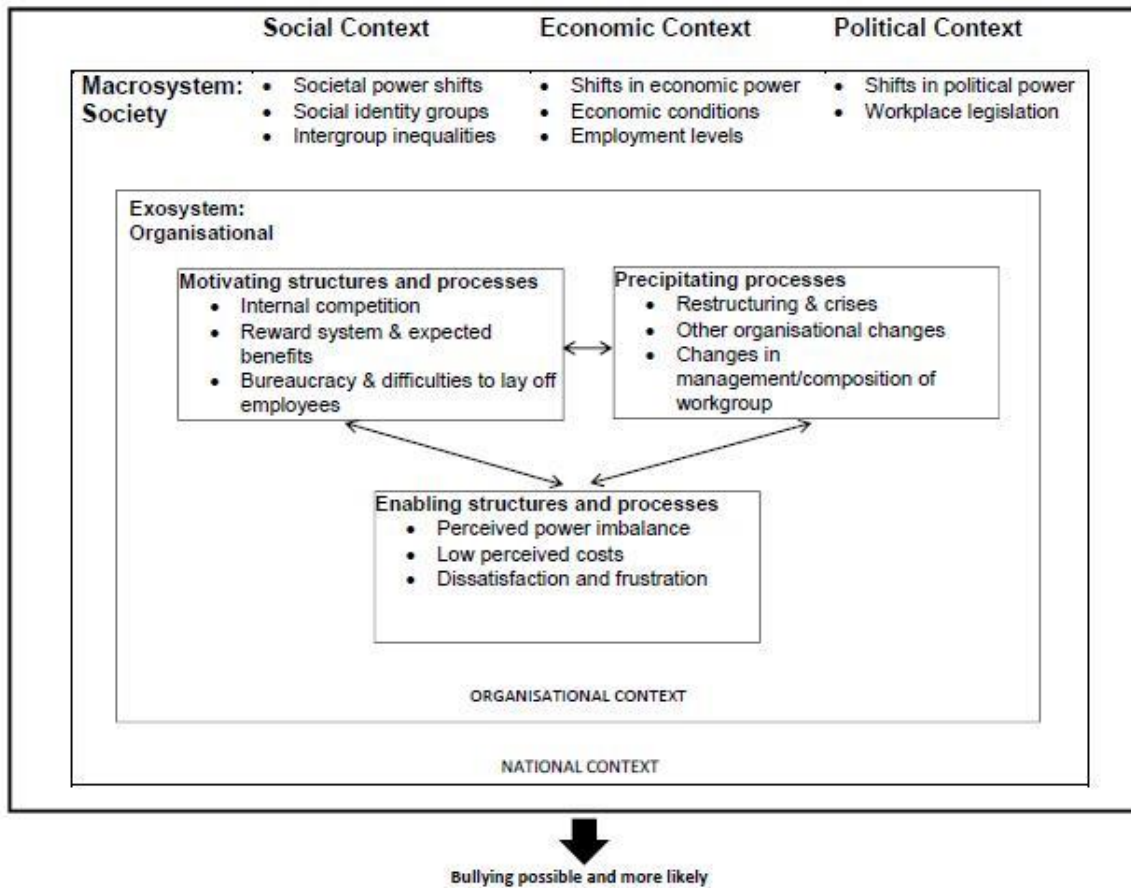
take any action, or witnesses it and thinks along the lines of, “I am lucky that person is not me.”

Many bystanders who choose merely to watch a bullying situation unfold instead of doing something believe that it is “none of their business”. Some feel that intervening will make the bully turn on them, whilst others believe intervening will do little to stop it, especially since many reported cases have been shown to yield no action against the bully. The narratives of the bystanders in the focus group discussions suggest a more complex picture with regards to the role of bystanders in bullying situations. While some bystanders chose to “look the other way” and ignore the bullying for various personal reasons, many were found even to have gone as far as challenging the bully. Those that took action felt a responsibility to intervene “for the good of the whole”. Their active participation in bullying situations goes against the “it’s none of my business; or I am glad it’s not me” widespread depiction of bystander reaction, or lack of it in bullying situations. However, bystanders who did take action against the bullying reported having become targets themselves, as the bullies turned against them. This finding supports literature which argues that bystanders seldom intervene in bullying situations because they feel it is better to “ignore the bullying to keep the bully away”.

Third, the most consistent finding which cuts across all research questions was found to be the role of ‘context’, specifically, societal / national context in explaining and understanding organisational factors which make bullying possible and more likely in organisations. Context has become increasingly important in organisational behaviour. To date, little bullying research and theory development, with the exception of a study by Johnson (2011), has addressed changes at the societal level and the potential effects of such changes on the organisation. Johnson’s (2011) study resulted in the development of an “ecological model of workplace bullying” derived from Bronenbrenner’s (1979) ecology of human development theory, which argues that human development is shaped by factors in a nested layer of hierarchical system. In this study, the most far-reaching findings are the implications for Salin’s (2003b) conceptual framework. The findings from the present study suggest the need to expand

Salin's framework. Figure 7-2 (below) presents the expanded conceptual framework based on the results of this research.

**Figure 7-2: Expansion of Salin's (2003) conceptual framework**



If we believe the ecology of human development theory to be true it follows that organisational behaviour, in this case the factors which make bullying possible and more likely, are also shaped by a nested layer of hierarchical system, such as the macrosystem and exosystem, as depicted in Figure 7-2 (above). Based on this study's findings, societal and cultural norms of behaviour, as well as laws governing the economic and political landscape, were found to be workplace bullying antecedents at the macrosystem level.



The expanded conceptual framework in Figure 7-2 recognises Johns' (2006) call for attention to context in organisations behaviour, and Cappelli and Sherer's (1991) observation that organisational characteristics provide context for individuals and the external environment for organisations. The expanded framework consists of two interrelated systems that make bullying possible and more likely. The two systems are the macrosystem (society, i.e., social, economic, and political), and the exosystem (the organisation). The current study's expanded framework suggests that bullying is more likely to happen when conflict from the social context, such as societal power shifts and inequalities among social identity groups, spills into the workplace. It suggests that for each society, it is important to identify the salient social identity groups because these differ by national context. Similarly, the framework suggests that shifts in economic power and economic conditions, as well as prevailing employment levels, create uncertainties which make targets feel vulnerable, and thus tolerate the bullying for fear of losing their jobs. For example, many targets choose to endure the bullying in situations characterised by high levels of unemployment, rather than face the prospect of becoming unemployed. Lastly, the framework suggests that changes in the political context, such as shifts in political power and workplace legislation, have an effect on interrelationships and behaviours inside organisations.

Similar to the ecological model of workplace bullying, the expanded framework also drew from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecology of human development theory by recognising the possibility of consequential relationships between the national context (social, political and economic issues) and organisations' behaviour and management practices. The theory identifies four factors which shape human development, namely, the *microsystem* (relationship between an individual and environment in an immediate setting, e.g., school, workplace); the *mesosystem* (intersection of microsystems, e.g., interactions among family, school); the *exosystem* (an extension of the *mesosystem* that directly affects the individual, e.g., organisation, government); and the *macrosystem*, that is, the overarching institutional systems, e.g., economic, social, political systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In other words, there is a need for a relational approach that underscores the significance of the macro societal context for

understanding the exosystem antecedents to workplace bullying that ultimately influence and shape micro-level bullying behaviours and tactics. In general, the expanded framework can be applied to other national contexts as it suggests that the workplace bullying phenomenon will reflect salient social, economic and political realities. Recent work by Klarsfeld (2010) demonstrates how different national contexts shape and influence diversity and employment equity issues and practices in different countries.

Implicit in Salin's (2003b) expanded conceptual framework is that societal, cultural norms of behaviour, race and gender stereotypes, as well as laws governing the economy, employment and politics, serve as antecedents of workplace bullying at the macrosystem level. In this study, many targets attributed bullying to dissatisfaction and frustration with organisational changes emanating from changes in labour legislation and related codes of good practice at the national level. This implies that when legislation such as the Employment Equity Act, aimed at empowerment of all is perceived by Whites as unfair and discriminatory, resistance to the legislation ensued in the form of bullying behaviour to those favoured by the legislation. The end result of this dissatisfaction and frustration negatively impacted group cohesion and team spirit, whereby White employees saw Black counterparts as unworthy beneficiaries of appointments and promotions to higher management positions.

Other findings not directly related to the study's research questions point to low levels of awareness regarding the prevalence of bullying in South African workplaces. Many participants initially found difficulty in associating the concept of bullying with the workplace, and were thus not sure how to respond to my questions about whether or not they thought bullying existed in their organisations. It was only after I shared the study's operational definition of bullying with them that they believed that it did happen in organisations. An inference to be made from this finding is that the South African work environment has a low recognition of bullying as a workplace issue. To this end, participants expressed a desire for more research to be conducted to raise awareness about the prevalence of bullying in the South African workplace. They also expressed a

need for equally well researched bullying policy guidelines to be developed and publicised at the same level as the Employment Equity and Harassment Policies.

Lastly, although advances in research into the role of organisations in workplace bullying have been made, the findings of this study suggest shedding light on the important role of context in making bullying at work possible and likely. The expanded framework suggests that the study of workplace bullying should extend to societal antecedents. Consequently, more research on the role of societal context in understanding workplace bullying is needed. With this in mind, the expanded conceptual framework suggests a need to couch workplace bullying research within a national context to derive an holistic, integrated picture and understanding of factors that make bullying possible and more likely.

## **7.7 SUMMARY**

This chapter discussed the findings of the study in relation to the research questions. The summarised findings suggest the likelihood that bullying may be a pervasive problem in the South African workplace, even though many participants still associate it with school bullying. The study also found power to be at the centre of most bullying situations. For example, targets experienced bullying from individuals with positional power and authority over them, and from peers who had power over them. Bullies who bullied their peers derived power from their association and strong relationships with powerful people in the organisation.

The nature of bullying and bullying tactics reported in the study took the form of individual behaviours, group behaviours, often referred to as “ganging up” or “mobbing” in the bullying literature, as well as organisational factors, processes and practices. The organisational factors which fuelled and nurtured bullying complement those in Salin’s (2003b) framework, however, they also provide a welcome empirical test of it, and expand on it by highlighting the effect of larger societal context on behaviours in organisations in general, and on bullying in particular. These findings make important

contributions to the body of knowledge and Salin's framework, and to future workplace bullying research.

The next chapter presents the conclusion of the study, and discusses research implications, contributions, limitations, as well as propositions for future research derived from the theoretical and practical implications discussed in this chapter.

## CHAPTER 8

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### 8.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to draw conclusions from the research implications and main findings of the study. It also elaborates on the contributions it makes to the body of workplace bullying knowledge at the theoretical and practical levels. Lastly, it lists the limitations of the research and makes suggestions for future research.

Research into workplace bullying initially focussed on individual factors of bullying such as personality traits and characteristics of the target or bully, as well as on bullying as an interpersonal conflict (Einarsen et al., 1994; Einarsen, 1999; Vartia, 1996). However, subsequent research in the 2000s ushered in a steady shift towards examining the influence organisational factors, such as culture, leadership, restructuring, downsizing and change, have on the prevalence of bullying in the workplace (see for example, Einarsen, 2000; Einarsen et al., 2003; Hoel & Salin, 2003; Salin, 2003a; 2003b; Skogstad, Matthiesen, & Einarsen, 2007). It is within this context that this study focussed on organisational antecedents which contribute to making bullying possible and more likely.

Salin (2003b) developed a model which placed factors that make bullying possible and more likely in the workplace into three categories. These are (i) motivating structures and processes (e.g., internal competition, reward systems and expected benefits, bureaucracy and difficulties to lay employees off); (ii) precipitating processes (e.g., restructuring and crises, other organisational changes such as changes in management and/or in the composition of the workgroup); and (iii) enabling structures and processes (e.g., perceived power imbalance, low perceived costs, and dissatisfaction and frustration). According to Salin (2003b), these factors provide a multifaceted way of explaining why bullying occurs, or is likely to occur in organisations.

This study set out to investigate how targets, HR professionals and bystanders perceived and defined workplace bullying and associated organisational antecedents. The study's primary research method was in-depth qualitative interviews with participants drawn from six companies in the financial services and manufacturing industries. Nine and 11 interviews were held with HR professionals and targets respectively, and two focus group discussions of three participants per group were held with bystanders. All 20 interviews and bystander focus group discussions were thematically analysed.

To the best of my knowledge, this study is the first to provide a three-way view on bullying, and to empirically examine Salin's workplace bullying conceptual framework. Furthermore, the study illustrates how workplace bullying can be researched and understood taking into account the societal context within which the study is conducted. Lastly, the expanded conceptual framework initially developed by Salin (2003b) and the process followed to arrive at its expansion exemplifies how the revised framework can be applied to bullying and other negative workplace phenomena of interest.

## **8.2 RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS**

The study's findings have theoretical and practical implications for workplace bullying research.

### **8.2.1 Implications for research**

The study suggests the need for explicit incorporation of societal context in the approach to researching organisational factors that make bullying possible and more likely to occur. Johns (2006:386) defines context as "situational opportunities and constraints that affect the occurrence and meaning of organisational behaviour as well as functional relationships between variables", from which one can infer that organisations are a microcosm within a macrocosm, and that any organisational

behaviour research will therefore be ill-advised to separate the micro (organisation) from the macro (societal context).

In this study, the societal context of South Africa served as the main motivating, precipitating and enabling factor which, according to the participants, made bullying possible and more likely. This finding points to the need for future workplace bullying research and conceptual frameworks to place more emphasis on societal context. Moreover, Johns (2006) reminds us that context is a good aid in shaping the meaning underlying the behaviours and attitude found in organisations. To date, research on workplace bullying appears to have insufficiently factored in the effect of societal context on its organisational antecedents. While several workplace bullying researchers and practitioners (see for example, Eirnarsen et al. 2011; Leymann 1996; Salin 2003b), recognise that society can influence and make bullying more likely in the workplace, very little has been written about how this occurs. Eirnarsen et al. (2011) suggest examining the influence of bullying in the workplace against the background of societal factors such as culture and socio-economic realities.

A serendipitous context issue, namely, social identity, emerged as salient throughout my engagement with participants. Many targets defined and made sense of their bullying experiences through aspects of the identity they derived from group memberships. Tajfel, (1978:63) defines social identity as “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (groups) together with the value of emotional significance attached to that membership”. There are two distinguishable features from this definition. First, it presupposes that an individual can belong to more than one social group. In this study, targets identified with at least two social groups, based on race and gender.

Second, the degree to which a person emotionally identifies and attaches to a specific group depends on that person’s self-concept and the way he/she categorises her/himself. Social categorisation is an extension of social identity in that members of groups compare their own groups (in-groups) with similar but distinct groups (out-groups). These comparisons and distinctions are usually based on stereotypes

members hold about one another. It follows, therefore, that the formation of social identity is shaped by, and is based on the internalisation of these social categorisations. This suggests that careful consideration be given to issues of social identity when examining the effect of context on bullying behaviour in organisations. Each society has its own salient identity groups.

### **8.2.2 Implications for practice**

This study's findings have several implications for practice. First, they highlight the issue of trust for HR. Many targets perceive HR as being on "management's side". The mistrust of HR professionals is attributed to their perceived "closeness" to management. HR professionals on the other hand, perceive themselves as "employee champions". This gap in how targets view HR professionals and how HR professionals view their role in bullying situations has implications for addressing bullying in the workplace. However, the gap also provides HR professionals with practical contributions they can make towards heightening awareness around the prevalence of bullying in the workplace.

Similar to HR professionals, participants also viewed management's role in bullying situations as not neutral. They felt management perpetuated bullying by not acting on reported bullying cases. Moreover, many bullies in this study were found to be senior people with power and influence, implying that management makes bullying acceptable by abusing its own power and by overlooking reported cases of bullying. HR professionals and management would do well to put in place processes and supportive policies which set out the definition of workplace bullying, including ways of addressing the behaviour when reported and/or detected. Another finding with practical implications for HR professionals indicates a need to address diversity-based, specifically race- and gender-induced bullying.

Another implication emanating from the study's findings critiques the current definition of sexual harassment in South Africa which incorporates bullying. While the Protection from Harassment Act, 17 of 2011 provides clear guidelines and definition of



harassment, the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA), an independent dispute resolution body established in terms of the Labour Relations Act, 66 of 1995 (LRA), describes bullying as a form of harassment. By subsuming it under harassment, this definition fails to sufficiently heighten awareness around the dangers of workplace bullying. The definitional overlaps and interrelationships of harassment and bullying by the CCMA are at the heart of the current study's participants, who perceive harassment as a form of bullying and vice versa. Presenting bullying as part of harassment creates a limiting paradox, in that the phenomenon cannot be studied outside of harassment. Furthermore, there is also a good chance that bullying behaviour may be cloaked and remain invisible to those responsible for such offences and even to its victims. The question thus arises, "at what point is it bullying, and what point is it merely harassment?"

The bullying–harassment finding highlights two further issues. First, it points to the underdeveloped theoretical and conceptual frameworks to the study of bullying as a gendered phenomenon. While the research on sexual harassment extensively draws from feminist literature and theory, little research, apart from studies by Salin and Hoel (2013), and Simpson and Cohen (2004), explores bullying as a gendered phenomenon. Second, the finding points to the need for a South African policy framework or legislation to articulate guidelines on what bullying is and how to deal with it in the same way that the legislation has done with harassment. There is therefore a case for policy or legislative conceptualisation of bullying separate from sexual harassment if bullying is to be recognised and addressed as a serious workplace problem in South Africa.

### **8.3 RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION**

The study makes a contribution to the dearth of workplace bullying research in South Africa and to the extant body of knowledge on workplace bullying. Regarding methodology, the study investigated perceptions, definitions and organisational antecedents of workplace bullying through an interpretivist paradigm. Previous

workplace bullying research is characterised by functionalist paradigms (Samnani, 2013) which approach the study of it as an interpersonal problem (Tracy et al., 2006). Non-functionalist approaches, for instance interpretivism, offer insights into workplace phenomena by broadening their scope to include other organisational and, as was found in this study, societal forces at play.

By exploring the perceptions and organisational antecedents of bullying through the interpretivist paradigm, this study underscored the importance of understanding bullying from the participants' subjective experiences, but, within the broader societal context. The interpretivist approach allowed participants to share their experiences while seeking to understand broader bullying forces such as organisational change and restructuring, as well as the dramatic social, economic and political changes occurring in South Africa. The study thus makes a key contribution to the literature by providing a more complete understanding of workplace bullying through the application of the interpretivist paradigm.

The study also makes a significant contribution by expanding Salin's conceptual framework on organisational antecedents of bullying. Additionally, the study confirmed the prevalence of bullying in the South African workplace by providing examples of behaviours which participants perceived, defined and considered to be bullying. In summary, the study makes theoretical contributions in answering the fourth research question and practical contributions in answering research questions one to three.

### **8.3.1 Theoretical contributions**

The findings on how targets and HR professionals perceive bullying help explain the effect of organisational structures, procedures, processes and practices in contributing to bullying in the workplace. Furthermore, the use of qualitative methods makes a contribution to research conducted by South African scholars. Previous South African research on bullying was conducted through surveys (e.g., Cunniff & Mostert, 2012; Pietersen, 2007; and Steinman, 2003). Additionally, the study makes a contribution

through the use of multiple research players to provide different perspectives on bullying. While the findings confirm the general depiction of targets as passive recipients of bullying, out of fear of retaliation and further abuse, and bystanders as passive observers of bullying, they equally highlight situations of how targets resisted bully behaviour and tactics, and instances where bystanders intervened in bullying situations they witnessed. This finding conflicts with how the literature review depicts the role of targets and bystanders in bullying situations.

In this study, several targets did not see themselves as powerless and thus did everything in their power to try to improve their situation. Some went beyond the call of duty to try and win over the bully. Some spoke to the bully to inquire and clarify what they did wrong, or what the bully required from them. Some even confronted or ignored the bully. As a last resort, many opted to resign and leave, which can be seen as an act of resistance against a powerful bully. Similarly, bystanders who intervened in bullying situations they witnessed felt a “responsibility” to do something about the bullying to ensure that such abusive behaviours did not shape the work environment. This apparent contradiction suggests a new way of investigating the role and positions of “the players” in bullying situations. The findings argue against placing workplace bullying actors into discrete categories, as individuals may fall into more than a single category (i.e., target or bystander).

Perhaps the study’s most significant contribution is in the advancement of conceptual frameworks for explaining workplace bullying. The current study breaks new ground in illuminating the role larger societal context plays in making bullying possible and more likely. In particular, the research offers an expansion of Salin’s (2003b) framework by incorporating larger societal context in explaining motivating and precipitating factors which enable and/or lead to bullying in organisations. Little research on bullying has addressed the potential effect changes at the macro-society level might have on organisations and, consequently, the prevalence of bullying. Thus, even though the study was conducted in South Africa, the expanded conceptual framework can be generalised and used for workplace bullying studies in other nations.

This study helps to bridge the gap between researching organisational and societal antecedents of workplace bullying. Bridging this gap suggests a refinement of the study's conceptual framework by Salin (2003b) and provides the basis for a more holistic approach for researching and understanding the motivating and precipitating processes, as well as enabling structures which make bullying possible and more likely. Doing so resulted in expanding Salin's (2003b) model discussed in chapter 7, to include the influence of societal context.

### **8.3.2 Practical contributions**

The study's findings which identified bullying as a prevalent, albeit not a widely known problem in the South African workplace, make important contributions for HR professionals who wish to raise awareness of bullying and counteract its effects in the workplace. The findings indicate that bullying-specific policies and legislation separate from harassment may be necessary for heightening awareness regarding the prevalence of bullying in the workplace.

Currently, Section 6 of the Employment Equity Act protects employees from harassment, however, no bullying-specific legislation exists, and bullying is incorporated in the definition of harassment. As shown in the study's findings, incorporating bullying into the definition of harassment led to some participants' inability to distinguish harassment from workplace bullying. In turn, many participants, and by implication many employees are unaware that bullying is an equally serious workplace offence. The study also shows that not having a formal platform for reporting or addressing bullying made it difficult for many targets to report it. Therefore, the findings suggest a need to educate both employees and employers on the manifestations and effects of bullying in the South African workplace. HR professionals could facilitate the education process by developing policies that define workplace bullying, distinguishing the behaviour from harassment.

Additionally, the findings suggest a need for organisations to have authentic, strategic and courageous conversations about the imperatives of transformation in the workplace to help prevent race- and gender-induced bullying as reported by Black and/or female targets. HR professionals can facilitate these conversations by developing and overseeing the implementation of diversity programmes aimed at making work environments receptive of women and Blacks, as well as embrace the spirit of legislation, such as the Employment Equity Act.

Having policies and related interventions is, however, not enough. For policies and interventions aimed at thwarting bullying to be effective they need to clarify roles and responsibilities as well as put in place governance structures with specific mandates to drive and oversee their implementation. For example, bystanders who took action against the bullying could be trained on how to support targets without making themselves vulnerable for retaliation by bullies. Similarly, employees could be trained to identify bullying signs, and on ways to seek out help from their colleagues to increase social support, while heightening awareness about the prevalence of bullying in the workplace.

To succeed in preventing and handling bullying incidents, bullying policies and programmes must be put in place, and clarify processes which employees can use and follow to report the bullying (Steinman, 2003). Additionally, they must provide a clear definition of what bullying is and what it is not. Previous studies have shown that beyond research, addressing workplace bullying requires the design and implementation of anti-bullying policies, legislation and training interventions. Fox and Stallworth's (2009) work is instrumental in demonstrating how workplace bullying can be practically addressed through dispute resolution and workplace training interventions.

In summary, this study aims to make a valuable practical contribution by providing insights, guidance and mechanisms which HR professionals and bystanders can use to prevent and handle bullying incidents. Although future research is warranted to gain insights into how bullies perceive and define bullying and associated organisational

antecedents, this study should contribute to bullying research in South Africa and help to raise awareness and understanding of the phenomenon.

#### **8.4 LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH**

No study is without limitations, despite efforts to mitigate potential effects. A possible limitation is the exclusion of the bully's voice in defining workplace bullying. Targets, HR professionals and bystanders' perceptions are not the only ones to shape deeper understanding of the bullying phenomenon in South Africa. Other voices and perceptions, such as those of the bullies, are equally important in understanding bullying. However, given the nature of the study it is highly probable that no one would have identified themselves as being a bully.

When considering the low levels of some participants' awareness of bullying in the context of the workplace I cannot preclude the possibility that providing a definition of bullying could have led to high incidences of self-reporting. It seems plausible that participants, who are less familiar with, and less aware of the prevalence of the phenomenon in the workplace, may have defined it differently. Moreover, estimates of the prevalence of bullying have been shown to be dependent on how it is defined (Johnson, 2009). Since bullying is not a well-known workplace phenomenon in South Africa, and since participants would, in the most likelihood ascribe different things to the label "bullying", I chose to provide participants with the study's operational definition of bullying to learn how participants' perceptions and definitions of bullying differ with, or are similar to the way the extant literature defines the phenomenon. Their own descriptions of their experiences included perpetrator behaviours that have been classified as bullying behaviours in previous research.

Lastly, another possible limitation of this research stems from the participants being white collar workers in the financial services and manufacturing industries. As a result, the findings may have limited transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to bullying among blue collar workers and those in other industries. However, the purpose of this study

was to gain insight into the workplace bullying phenomenon in South Africa, not generalisability. Future research in South Africa should include blue collar employees as well as other industries.

A fruitful extension of this research would be to explore and examine the suggested propositions for future research derived from the study's implications and limitations.

## **8.5 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Based on the implications and limitations discussed above, several propositions for future research are suggested.

Proposition 1: The conflation of bullying with sexual harassment is possible and more likely when targets are women and when the difference and/or interrelationship between the two phenomena are not clearly defined.

Proposition 2: Behaviours that employees consider as racial and gender discrimination may manifest as racialised and gendered bullying.

Proposition 3: Major social identity changes and societal power shifts on the social, political and economic levels have workplace effects which make bullying possible and more likely.

The above propositions offer researchers areas for further exploration.

## **8.6 CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The findings of this study have shown that bullying is a serious yet silent and relatively unacknowledged problem in the South African workplace. If this is true, one can reasonably conclude that many employees and employers in South Africa are unaware of the extent, nature and effects of bullying in their workplaces. This is understandable, given the paucity of bullying research in South Africa. Unlike issues relating to

Employment Equity and sexual harassment, there has been little education available on public and policy debates about bullying as it relates to the workplace. The focus of much public debate and education on bullying has been on bullying in schools.

The study also showed that workplace bullying is a complex workplace problem that does not lend itself to simple solutions. The expansion offered of Salin's (2003b) framework illustrates this complexity by pointing to the dynamic, interactive and multiple nature of the phenomenon. Additionally, the findings of this study regarding how participants perceive and define bullying, as well as the expanded framework, show that antecedents of workplace bullying can be found at societal, organisational, and individual levels. Similarly, the study has shown how actions or lack of actions against reported cases of bullying at all these levels could reinforce the factors that make bullying seem acceptable.

In closing, it is my hope that the results and effort of this research will be a further contribution to uncovering what remains an unrecognised, silent problem in the South African workplace.

The next chapter shares my personal reflections during the process and journey of conducting this study.



## CHAPTER 9

### REFLECTIONS

“I write what I like” – Steve Biko

#### 9.1 INTRODUCTION

It is perhaps fitting for me to start this chapter by examining why I dreaded writing it so much. During the early days of my research analysis, when I began to construct the chapters, I thought I did not hear my supervisor correctly when she said to me I should write a “whole chapter” on reflections. My initial thoughts were whether a whole chapter on reflections was warranted, given that I was reflecting by way of memos and notes to myself throughout the process. I tried all I could to get out of writing this chapter; needless to say there is no guessing what the outcomes of my efforts are. The biggest consolation and incentive was that I could write what I liked, however I liked.

With my protestations out of the way, I thought long and hard about what to focus the chapter on. Ultimately, I decided it should be on sharing some of my personal learnings and information not already covered in the main chapters of this thesis. Essentially, telling my personal story of going through this PhD journey; connecting some of the dots which I had missed during the data collection, analysis and writing process, as well as sharing what I believe is worth sharing. In the end, I came to think and acknowledge that writing a “whole chapter” on reflections is not such a bad idea after all, because doing so made me think and reflect hard on my PhD journey as a person, as a professional and as a budding scholar. Looking back, this has been both the most testing and fulfilling journey upon which I have ever embarked. With this in mind, it is fitting that I start the chapter with the caption “my story”, which incorporates my reflections on my attitude, ability and self-concept, which I believe contributed to the completion of this research study. This is followed by my reflections on conducting

research on bullying as someone who had been bullied before. Next, I share my views and reflections on a metaphor used by one of the targets to describe her experience of the bully. I then close with an epilogue.

## 9.2 MY STORY

Many things have happened and changed between the time I decided to enrol for a PhD in 2010 and the present time (2014). First, I was a bullying target at the time of deciding to enrol for a PhD. Initially, like many of the bullying targets I have interviewed in this study, I too was unaware that I was being bullied. After all, I have a strong personality, I am outspoken, and am a diligent performer. I am saying this because being a target or “victim” of bullying is often associated with weakness. Being a curious person who always seeks to find answers and/or solve problems, it was one Friday afternoon after yet another very bad experience at work that when I got home, I took out my computer and typed in and described the things that were happening to me that I was introduced to the world of workplace bullying. Through my search to make sense of what was happening to me at work I was thrilled to find that my experience had a ‘name’ and that people in Europe and other parts of the world had already been studying this workplace phenomenon for the previous 10 to 15 years. This is how the focus of my PhD research was revealed to me, especially after my initial literature review revealed limited workplace bullying research in South Africa. At that stage, I thought to myself, “I now understand what authors mean when they say books write themselves. That is, what they need to write about often reveals itself to them”.

Second, my decision to take up a PhD was also premised on the fact that, at the time, I was working for an institution in which I felt I needed a PhD for career development, because many high-ranking senior managers and leaders had one. Also, as an Organisational Development and Change Management practitioner at the time, I used models and frameworks developed by academics and became interested in knowing the ‘other’ side of academia with a view to bridging the chasm between theory and

practice. Additionally, I became drawn to the idea of someday being the conduit of bridging this chasm, and the only way I felt I could do that was to 'train' to be an Organisational Behaviour scholar by taking on a PhD. Lastly, the organisation for which I was working at the time offered bursaries to its employees to study towards any degree, including a PhD, so I decided to make use of that opportunity for the period that I was employed at that institution.

Third, after successfully going through a rigorous application process and being one of the few selected to the PhD programme, I changed jobs within the first year of starting the programme, this after being told at the orientation for new PhD students that one of the things they should not do was to change jobs in the middle of their programme. As if changing jobs at the early stages of my PhD journey was not enough, I took up an HR Executive position in an organisation born out of a merger between two of South Africa's top five financial services (insurance) companies. Furthermore, as if taking an HR executive position in merging companies was not enough, I also moved houses, and I still needed to participate in the PhD programme colloquia!

The University of Pretoria's Department of Human Resource Management in the Faculty of Economics and Management Sciences ran Colloquia for PhD Organisational Behaviour (OB) students. The purpose was to turn us into OB scholars or at the very least fully expose and immerse us in the Organisational Behaviour field and body of knowledge. At the end of the colloquia series, we were expected to be able to:

- “Describe Organisational Behaviour (OB) as an independent study field from a holistic point of view
- Understand the contextual and systemic nature of OB, and
- Clearly understand the concepts of organisation, work, behaviour and organisational behaviour.” (University of Pretoria: Towards a PhD in Organisational Behaviour, Colloquium Assignments. 2011:3).

The above outcomes were articulated well by one professor who, in our very first colloquium said, “PhD is not a topic.” This was in response to one student who complained that she did not see the value of doing the colloquia which taught her about Organisational Behaviour when all she wanted was to do was work and read articles and theories related to her topic. These words “PhD is not a topic” got imprinted in my mind’s eye and it was a while into the programme before I fully understood what those words meant. For example, for colloquium 1, the theme of my assignment was organisational context, and I had to prepare and submit a paper, as well as prepare and deliver a lecture to an audience comprising the three faculty professors and my fellow four PhD students. The following was my assignment:

National cultures, ethnical cultures and global attitudes and behaviours present an important contextual aspect of organisations and behaviour in organisations. This is true for both local organisations and multinational.

*On the hand of the contributions of Geert Hofstede, Fons Trompenaars, Project GLOBE and Gallup World Poll II, critically discuss how the external context influences organisations and behaviour within every organisation. Also reflect on the following:*

- *What are the similarities and differences between findings between GLOBE, Gallup, Trompenaars and Hofstede – and does it matter?*
- *What are the main implications of such diversity on multinational organisations?*
- *What are the important implications for the management of businesses and government organisations within the South African context?*

I had not heard of Hofstede or Trompenaars before, and I barely remembered hearing something about Gallup but not much about project GLOBE. What I did not know at the time was how being exposed to and getting access to Hofstede’s work was going to serve me later, during the data collection and data analysis phases of my research. I dived into the research and my assignment with much vigour and energy, which can be expected from a newly ‘ordained’ PhD student, and felt very good about my assignment and my lecture, because I thought I had done enough. Nothing could prepare me for the feedback I received from my first colloquium. The good thing is May 2014 is a far-cry

from my first PhD (Organisational Behaviour) colloquium held in March 2011. The following is my reflection dated 14 March 2011, after giving my first lecture in the colloquium lecture series. I titled my reflection ***Feedback is a gift.***

### **Feedback is a gift**

I now feel like my journey to becoming a scholar has truly begun. For most of Saturday, Prof 1's words, "I am unfulfilled..., this is not a scholarly lecture..." played back in my mind. Central to this was the question to myself; "what does it take to become a scholar?" I felt totally out of my practitioner comfort zone, and it felt like for the first time, I now understand what it feels like to open one up and be vulnerable in order for new learning to occur. So, over-and-above the start of my journey to becoming a scholar, I believe I have taken the first important step on my personal journey to true self-discovery, and this is both exciting and nerve wrecking.

My biggest learning, particularly with my own lecture is that I cannot take for granted that everyone understands a construct. For example, I did not define culture and went right straight into the lecture. I probably did not see the need for doing so, because I immediately focussed on the questions that I needed to address to the exclusion of providing the important foundation of defining the construct I was working with, before going to demarcating my lecture. I also heard Prof 2's words when she made a comment about learning to accept and not resist feedback, and the example she gave was, in some instances your supervisor, or examiner may suggest that you cut a big chunk of your work out...and that we need to be adaptable and always be ready to go where we had not intended to go before.

The important key questions which I walked away with include the following:

- What is theory? How do you know when something is a theory? When Prof 2 asked the questions, they seemed like such simple questions, yet I now know that they are not.
- Why do we have to understand systems theory as OB scholars?

The theme of my reflection is therefore, feedback is a gift, and this is the commitment I am making to myself in my journey of self-discovery as I strive to become a scholar.

So thank you for the gifts you gave on Saturday.

Ngao

True learning had begun in earnest and this included the true meaning of feedback, not just its intellectual meaning. I did not expect taking on a PhD programme to be easy, especially while holding down a full-time job, and one such as I had during a merger. But no one could have prepared me for what lay ahead of me. I was tested on all fronts. There was a time when I doubted my own ability and competence to do this, when I actually “quit” the programme in my mind and heart. I wrote to the University informing them that it was not possible for me to continue being on the programme, given my merger, people-related workload and responsibilities at work.

The interesting thing is I ‘quit’ after successfully achieving two key milestones in a PhD journey, namely, after the university had approved my research proposal, and after I had received research ethical clearance from the University’s Committee for Ethics Research. I had even conducted one pilot interview, when I realised how drained I was, and how I no longer had the strength to continue. These two key milestone achievements did not mean anything. When I looked at the road ahead I became overwhelmed and the only logical thing to do was to choose between my work and the PhD. I did not take the decision I was to make lightly. Before then I had read articles which showed the PhD drop-out statistics. The revealing one was that many PhD students dropped out at the proposal stage, that is, most appeared to do so before completing and getting their proposals approved. I could not find many statistics of those who dropped out after completing their proposals. Moreover, I could not find statistics of those who dropped out after gaining approval for both their proposals and ethical clearance to conduct the research. I was going to be one of the few! My own life philosophy was challenged.

One of my life philosophies is premised on the principle of “never start something you cannot finish.” I wondered about how, in a few years’ time, I would feel about not carrying on with my PhD. I then counteracted my own thoughts and challenged my life philosophy with something like “...but if I am reading a boring book, I do not have to finish it...” I dwelled on these questions for a good two months without doing anything PhD-related. I was not happy because I was riddled with guilt for not putting any or

enough work towards the PhD. When I forced myself to do so, I had no energy, and was no longer inspired to carry on. I knew then that I was not going to continue. Everything that I believed of myself, my abilities, my self-view, self-efficacy and self-esteem relating to my ability to carry on with a view to completing the PhD were deeply questioned and significantly dented.

I did “quit” because I believed I did not have it in me to carry on. I also looked myself in the “mirror” and frankly admitted to myself that perhaps I did not have what it took to have a PhD. This was a big thing to admit to myself because as a child of the 1960s, being Black and a woman growing up in apartheid South Africa, raised by a very strong woman in my mother, and surrounded by very strong women, quitting was (and still is) never an option! I spoke to these women, my mother and sister and told them about my decision, and all their response was they supported and would stand by my decision, only if I was sure it was the right one for me. The University received my news with sadness, and three women supported me through this difficult period of my PhD journey. The three University women were the Professor who was the Programme Manager for the PhD (OB) programme, my supervisor, and lastly, the PhD (OB) administrator. Their support went something like this, “we understand the pressures of both the PhD and your work on you, and rather than quit and de-register now, take the whole year off, and in the new year come back and let’s talk, and if you still want to discontinue then we will stand by your decision to de-register”. This was the beginning of 2012. I was most heartened by my supervisor, who took the time to come and meet with me at my office to talk about where I was at the time, that is, my decision to quit the programme. Her recommendation to take “time out” and the entire 2012 off, not to think about the PhD until towards the end of the year, and concentrate on the projects at work, was the best advice I had at the time. It felt like a heavy weight had been lifted from my shoulders. Our agreement was that in early 2013 I would contact her and inform her about my final decision, and she promised to support and accept it, irrespective of what it was.

There is a saying in my language which when loosely translated into English says “to go backwards is not to quit, but to take strength”. This is exactly what happened. I think taking a year off from the PhD unconsciously tapped into and rescued my self-belief and “I can do anything I put my mind to” view of myself. Looking back now, I believe colloquium 2, back in March / April 2011 laid the foundation for my ability to re-access my attitude, self-view, self-efficacy and ability, which proved to be critical for my returning and continuing with the PhD. The focus of my colloquium 2 assignment and lecture was on “Attitude, ability and self-concept”.

### **9.2.1 Attitude, ability and self-concept in successfully completing the PhD**

It is true that everything happens for a reason. I got introduced to the concepts of attitude, ability and self-concept during the process of researching and preparing for my 2<sup>nd</sup> colloquium essay and lecture. Little did I know that my learnings and understanding of these concepts would stand me in good stead later on as the journey became more challenging.

Bem’s (1972) self-perception theory provides a powerful framework for explaining the domain of attitudes. According to it, attitudes are formed through inferences originating from observation of one’s behaviour. Even though updates and improvements were made to the self-perception theory (see for example, Fazio, 1987), I found the original theory by Bem (1972) still useful in explaining the process through which individuals, myself included, form their attitudes. What I got from this theory is that the dispositions that make up our psyche as human beings are based on assumptions and beliefs we hold about ourselves, and this includes the view we hold about our abilities. Ability is commonly accepted to be one of the most important personal causes of success or failure.

There are two schools of thought when it comes to beliefs about ability. The first views ability as a fixed entity, and views performance as being driven by goals. This school, therefore views substandard performance as indicative of a person’s deficiencies



(Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Research by Dweck and Leggett (1988) has found a link between goal orientation and a person's implicit ability. The same study by Dweck and Leggett (1988) shaped the second school of thought which views ability as skills that can be incrementally acquired over a period, experiences and situations. This view places the goal of performance on learning, which it sees as being aimed at increasing ability. The study also found a correlation between individuals' overall abilities and their orientation to incremental learning (Dweck & Leggett, 1988).

The study of self-concept, on the other hand, has a long history, dating as far back as 1902. Throughout the years, interest in self-concept research re-emerged and gained momentum in the early 1970s, long after the 1902 seminal writings of Charles Horton Cooley in his book "Human nature in the social order". Cooley's (1902) contribution to the earlier debates on self-concept was through what he termed the "looking-glass self", that is, a connection between the way an individual perceives her/himself and the way others perceive her/him.

Dember (1974) called the re-emergence of interest in the study of self-concept, the "cognitive revolution" in psychology. This brought about the recognition of the importance of self, and the self-concept in the behaviourism terrain. For example, research into self-concept in the 1970s found complementary mention within the social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), the self-perception theory (Bem, 1972), and the attribution theory (Epstein 1973). In the following decades, the works of Bandura (1982, 1989), Seligman (1991), Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), and others continued to provide further useful frames with which to describe, explain and potentially predict people's success and performance based on the nature of their self-concept.

I was amazed at myself when I turned to the attitude, ability and self-theories and positivity paradigm debates for guidance and review of my own performance and potential success in completing the PhD. I used what I learnt from Bandura's self-efficacy theory and Bem's self-perception theory to inform, and tap back into the positive beliefs I held about my attitude and ability, which proved to be important for transcending the challenges that I was facing during my PhD journey. Access to these

learnings in turn informed my decision to return and strive to complete what I had started, in line with my belief and philosophy of “always finish what you start”. Using my learnings from the self-theories to help me review and evaluate my decisions in this journey is an example of what I mean by my objective to *bridge the chasm between theory and practice*, and for this I tapped into findings of studies that have shown a positive correlation between a positive self-concept, self-efficacy and how well a person will perform in different situations. I related these to my own situation. Generally, a positive self-concept and high self-efficacy have been found to be positively correlated to performance (see for example, Bandura, 1997; Bandura & Wood, 1989; Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998).

In the next section, I share my reflections about conducting the research as someone who was once a bullying target.

### **9.3 CONDUCTING THE STUDY AS A PREVIOUS TARGET**

Almost without fail, all the targets I interviewed, except for the one who knew that I too was bullied, asked me for the reasons behind my choice of research topic. This simple question posed a paradoxical dilemma for me, especially if asked at the beginning of the interview. While I did not hide the fact that I too had experienced bullying when asked, I was always conscious about how informing the targets at the beginning of the interview might influence their responses to me as “one of them” (a victim).

Conducting a pilot study helped me prepare better for this question. Most importantly, pilot interviews helped me keep my non-verbal reaction to the targets’ responses in check. When I played back the tapes after the interviews in the pilot study I was shocked to hear my “enthusiasm” when the interviewee said something that either intrigued me, or I found interesting, or new, or resonated with my own previous experiences as a target. The pilot study provided me with the opportunity to test McNamara’s (2009) steps to take heed of as part of preparation for conducting interviews. McNamara (2009) argues that taking care of the basics is essential before

implementing interviews. These include (i) verifying that the tape recorder is in full working condition (if used) before conducting the interview; (ii) asking one question at a time; (iii) ***not showing emotional reactions, that is, remaining neutral during the interview***; (iv) staying in touch, and showing interest in what the interviewee is saying by occasionally nodding one's head; and, (v) providing transition from one topic to the other. The step I highlighted in bold and italics proved to be more important in conducting interviews in the full study, especially because some of the study's participants were my colleagues. Interviewing people I knew, and having been a target of bullying myself, brought up the issue of reflexivity.

Reflexivity in qualitative research is based on the premise that the researcher is also a participant, and thus cannot be divorced from the phenomenon being studied. Implied in reflexivity is the belief that data collected is often influenced by how respondents perceive the researcher (Holloway & Wheeler, 2002; Kuper, Lingard & Levinson, 2008; Watt, 2007), as well as the researcher's own biases and prejudices. Reflexivity therefore highlights potential power relations between the researcher and research participants that might influence the direction of the data being collected. Moreover, if participants know the researcher they may give responses which they believe the researcher wants to hear. To check my biases and achieve credibility of the data collected I returned to the participants to validate the data by confirming whether my interpretation of their responses to the interview questions was correct, before moving to the full research. I also repeated this process in the full study and also had two independent reviews of my coding, analysis and interpretations as another means of mitigating my biases.

Lastly, while I expected it, I was still surprised at the amount of empathy I had for the targets, and wondered, even though I consider myself an empathetic person, whether my huge empathy towards the targets had to do with the fact that I really "understood their pain", having been a target myself. However, at the same time, instead of feeling sad about my own bullying experiences, I felt gratitude for having gone through the experience because it gave me the resolve to be the best manager and leader I could

be; to get the best out of people without abusing them. Most importantly, my bullying experiences gave me a filter through which to judge my own behaviour towards others at work.

With the latter in mind, perhaps one of my propositions for future research should have been to explore and test the impact and influence of the researcher on the outcomes of a study on bullying in which the researcher was a target of bullying himself / herself.

#### **9.4 THE OCTOPUS METAPHOR**

In interviews with targets, the very first target I interviewed used an octopus metaphor to describe the bully. This metaphor created a powerful image in my mind that stuck with me throughout the study. The target commented

*The image I had of Sophie at the time when she was bullying me, when I had issues with her was..., I actually literally saw her as an octopus sitting in the corner of a tank sending out black ink which was polluting the whole tank. So, that's how I see this whole bullying situation. You have one person in the tank and they are actually polluting everything around here.*

I sought out to find an image which personified an octopus “sending out black ink” and was delighted to have found one (see Figure 9-1, below).

**Figure 9-1: Octopus “sending out black ink into the tank”**



Looking at the picture, I could draw parallels between the octopus spewing black ink into the environment and a bully polluting a working environment through his / her consistent abusive and negative behaviour against colleagues. Additionally, my search into the world of octopuses opened me to similarities between the characteristics of octopuses and bullies I would otherwise not have thought of. I first list the characteristics of octopuses. Next, I compare them to the characteristics of bullies in Table 9-1.

#### **9.4.1 Characteristics of an octopus**

My search for information about octopuses yielded interesting characteristics which I believe apply to bullies. I adapted the characteristics of octopuses from an article titled

“Deep Intellect: Inside the mind of an octopus” by Montgomery (2011), published in the online Orion Magazine.<sup>2</sup>

The following are some of the key characteristics of octopuses:

- Squirt out purple-black ink, and can change shape and colour to create camouflage to attack prey and/or protect themselves from predators.
- Can regenerate their tentacle if they lose one.
- Are very intelligent, and their “soft, agile” bodies give them the ability to navigate through mazes. The suckers on their tentacles help them move and they also use them to grip on slippery surfaces.
- Have the ability to frequently escape their captivity.

Table 9-1 below, summarises what I see as the similarities between octopuses and bullies, based on the above characteristics of octopuses.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/6474/>

**Table 9-1: Similarities between the characteristics of octopuses and bullies**

Octopus	Bully
<p><b>Attacking tactics</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uses its sharp beak and toothed tongue to pry open and drill into the shells of prey.</li> <li>• Inject paralyzing poison into its prey.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Attacking tactics</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demean, belittle and humiliate their targets to “drill” open their vulnerabilities and self-doubt.</li> <li>• Use positional power and influence to paralyse targets with fear or threats to fire them. Many targets seldom report the bullying for fear of further victimisation or losing their jobs.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Defence tactics</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Squirts dark ink to attack prey or protect itself from predators.</li> <li>• Ability to regenerate its tentacle if it loses one.</li> <li>• Camouflages and blends with the environment.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Defence tactics</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hide bullying behaviour behind performance.</li> <li>• Through close relationships with HR and other senior managers, the bully’s version of events is usually believed over the targets’.</li> <li>• Uses positional authority, power and influence to intimidate targets into silence.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Source of power</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Camouflage abilities.</li> <li>• Ability to regenerate a tentacle if it loses one.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Source of power</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceived power imbalance, e.g. positional power, influence, seniority.</li> <li>• Use of performance-related bullying tactics, especially for bullies who are key performers and therefore highly valued by the organisation.</li> </ul>

As in the context of the South African workplace, I came to the realisation that little is known about octopuses, except maybe for those who enjoy them on their dinner plates. As is generally the case with octopuses, it appears that many people in the South African workplace do not know much about bullying unless they have experienced it directly, or have seen someone bullied.

## 9.5 EPILOGUE

I remember early on in this journey, before I even applied for the PhD (OB) programme, the first thing I did was set up a meeting with my current supervisor, to explore the possibility of her becoming my supervisor, after I applied and was admitted in the programme. This was after one of my mentors, and someone whose judgement I trusted completely suggested that I go speak to Professor Nkomo about my PhD plans. In that first meeting, Professor Nkomo asked me a few “big” questions emanating from my reasons and aspirations for wanting to enrol in a PhD programme. I remember the conversation clearly as if it was yesterday. One of the questions was around my thoughts about ever joining the world of academia, to which I answered very quickly that I did not see myself doing that because, and the words I used were, “I am a practitioner, and have been a practitioner all my life”. I said these words in 2011.

In 2014, as I near my PhD journey’s finishing line, my answer to the same question has changed from an “either/or” to “and”. That is, instead of seeing myself purely as being a practitioner I see myself as an active participant in both the practitioner *and* the academia worlds, as opposed to choosing participation in one over the other. I was particularly surprised by how much I enjoyed the qualitative research method. Of all the chapters, excluding the one on reflections, I was most nervous and had the most trepidation about writing the methodology chapter. My fears were justified when I looked at the number of pages of transcribed data generated from the interviews. Thanks to *ATLAS.ti*, and two workshops on how to effectively apply it for analysing qualitative data, the methods chapter ended up being the most fulfilling for me. Albeit time-consuming and onerous, I found the process of making sense of large amounts of data, and seeing expected and unexpected themes emerge from the large data set, most gratifying, to the extent that I am even considering sharpening my qualitative knowledge and capabilities in the days following my corporate life.

While I cannot say for sure whether my next professional chapter will include academia or not, I do know that it will entail bridging the chasm between theory and practice. I believe that my corporate experience at the highest levels of the Human Resource



Management and Organisational Behaviour, combined with the experience of rigour and theoretical analysis which comes with the process of doctoral research, will stand me in good stead in my future role of bringing the worlds of theory and practice together.

In the end, this has been the single most humbling, challenging and most gratifying journey I had the privilege of undertaking in the quest for developing myself and deepening my workplace bullying and Organisational Behaviour knowledge base. In closing and looking back, I believe I am where I am today, in 2014, because I stayed true to my commitment that *feedback is a gift*, and this enabled me to accept, and work with the feedback from my supervisor under the knowledge that the *gift* is aimed at making my work better and defensible.

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**APPENDIX A**  
**INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY**



## INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN STUDY

Dear potential respondent

- Are you bullied at work?
- Have you ever been bullied at work?
- Do you know someone who is bullied, or has been bullied at work?
- Are you an HR professional currently employed in the private sector in general, and financial sector in particular?

If you answered 'yes' to one, or more of the above questions and are willing to share your experiences, you are invited to participate in an academic study conducted by Ngao Motsei, a Doctoral student in Organisational Behaviour, in the Department of Human Resource Management, Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, at the University of Pretoria. Ngao would like to interview the following types of people:

- People who have experienced bullying at work
- People who were not bullied themselves, but have seen others being bullied at work.
- HR professionals.

Should you be interested to participate in the study or want to find out more about the study, you can contact Ngao Motsei on 082 414 7935, or by e-mail on [ngao.motsei@gmail.com](mailto:ngao.motsei@gmail.com)

## **APPENDIX B**

### **LETTER OF INTRODUCTION AND INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE**

## LETTER OF INTRODUCTION AND INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE



### Letter of Introduction and Informed Consent for participation in academic research

Dept. of Human Resource Management

#### Title of the study

Perceptions and organisational antecedents of bullying in the South African workplace

Research conducted by:

Ms N DL Motsei (11019809)

Cell: 082 414 7935

Dear Respondent

You are invited to participate in an academic research study conducted by Ngao Motsei, a Doctoral student in Organisational Behaviour from the Department Human Resource Management at the University of Pretoria.

The purpose of the study is to explore and understand the way in which bullying is perceived in South African organisations. Specifically, the study aims to:

- Gain an insight into how bullying is perceived by targets of bullying, Human Resources (HR) practitioners and bystanders.
- Ascertain whether there is a distinction between bullying and other types of negative workplace behaviour such as sexual harassment, victimisation and racism.
- Gain insights into whether bullying is associated with personal conflicts or organisational issues.
- Identify the factors that lead individuals to label their workplace experiences as bullying.
- Identify the organisational antecedents to workplace bullying.

Please note the following:

- This study involves in-depth qualitative interviews and focus group discussions. Your name will not appear on the interview instruments and the answers you give will be treated as strictly confidential. You cannot be identified in person based on the answers you give.
- Your participation in this study is very important to us. However, it is voluntary. You may therefore choose not to participate and you may also stop participating at any time without any negative consequences.

- A sample of the questions for the interviews is attached. The interview sessions with bullying targets and HR practitioners will take approximately 1 hour of your time. During the interview you may be asked to voluntarily share any documents related to your experiences with bullying in the workplace. Any such documents you decide to share will be kept confidential.
- The focus group discussion with bystanders is expected to take between 1-2 hours.
- The results of the study will be used for academic purposes only and may be published in an academic journal. We will provide you with a summary of our findings on request.
- Please contact my study leader, Professor Stella Nkomo, at [stella.nkomo@up.ac.za](mailto:stella.nkomo@up.ac.za) if you have any questions or comments regarding the study.

Please sign the form to indicate that:

- You have read and understand the information provided above.
- You give your consent to participate in the study on a voluntary basis.

**Respondent's signature**

**Date**

**APPENDIX C**  
**INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR TARGETS**

## Appendix C

### Interview guide for bullying targets

#### Study's operational definition of workplace bullying

“Repeated and persistent negative acts towards one or more individual(s), which involve a perceived power imbalance and create a hostile work environment” (Salin, 2003:1214).

The key to bullying is frequency and duration. Single, isolated negative acts are not considered bullying.

**STUDY INTRODUCTION:** Thank you for participating in this study. There is a dearth of workplace bullying research in South Africa. This study is being conducted with a view to filling this knowledge gap and to gain a better understanding of organisational factors associated with bullying, from a bullying target's perspective.

#### **EXPLAIN CONSENT FORM AND ASK PARTICIPANT TO SIGN.**

1. In what industry are you currently employed?
2. What is your occupation?
3. How long have you been at your current job?
4. Male / Female
5. Using the above definition, do you believe you have been bullied at work? If yes, why? If no, why not?
6. Do you mind telling me what happened? (Follow ups)
  - a. How did it start; when did it start?

- b. What is the bully's position relative to yours?
  - c. Why do you think you were targeted?
  - d. What was the nature of the bullying (i.e. verbal, physical, punitive, etc)
  - e. Have you reported what has happened to you to anyone? If so, what happened? (Follow up if they say no – what made you not to report it? What did you do about it if anything? Has any of your colleagues witness the bullying?).
7. What was the bullying experience like for you? (Follow ups)
- a. Did you keep any records of your experiences? If yes, in what form? Will you be willing to share these with me, or allow me to review them? I will keep these documents confidential.
8. What factors, if any, do you think led to the bullying? Why?
9. How would you describe the culture of your organisation? Why? Do you know of any other instances of bullying?
10. How would you describe the culture of your direct work environment? That is, your business unit/division/department?
11. When you think about your bullying experience, how does it differ from other negative acts at work such as harassment, discrimination, etc.? Please explain. How does the term workplace bullying resonate with you? Why?
12. Have you ever been bullied in any organisation other than this current one?



13. We have now come to the end of our time together, is there anything else you want to talk about which we haven't covered?
14. In closing, looking back at your experience(s),
- a. What lessons have you learnt along the way?
  - b. What insights have you gained about bullying in the workplace?
  - c. What insights have you gained about factors that led you to label your negative experiences at work as bullying?
  - d. What advice would you give other bullying targets about dealing with bullying situations?
  - e. Do you mind serving as a member check? (explain what this means, and if so, get details)
  - f. Do you have any questions for me?

## **APPENDIX D**

### **INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR HR PROFESSIONALS**

## Appendix D

### Interview guide for HR professionals

#### Study's operational definition of workplace bullying

“Repeated and persistent negative acts towards one or more individual(s), which involve a perceived power imbalance and create a hostile work environment” (Salin, 2003:1214).

The key to bullying is frequency and duration. Single, isolated negative acts are not considered bullying.

**STUDY INTRODUCTION:** Thank you for participating in this study. There is a dearth of workplace bullying research in South Africa. This study is being conducted with a view to filling this knowledge gap and to gain a better understanding of organisational factors associated with bullying, from a Human Resource (HR) professional's perspective.

#### **EXPLAIN CONSENT FORM AND ASK PARTICIPANT TO SIGN.**

1. In what industry are you currently employed?
2. What is your occupation?
3. How long have you been at your current job?
4. To start off, let's talk about your views and experiences regarding bullying and other forms of negative behaviour at work.
  - a. Bullying is often associated with a boy/group of boys, or a girl/group of girls terrorising other kids at school. Looking at the definition of bullying, would you say

adults also bully each other at work? Have you or any of your colleagues seen bullying at work? If so, please describe what happened?

- b. Taking a closer look at the grievance cases the HR department has had to deal with in the past 6 to 12 months, which would you label as bullying? Why? Why not? Who were the targets?
  - i. What about the period prior to the 6 / 12 months?
  - c. What is the outcome of those reported grievance cases if known?
  - i. What happened to those who reported being bullied?
  - d. How does bullying differ from other forms of negative acts at work? Explain
  
5. Now I would like to understand the organisational factors which you believe contribute to bullying
  - a. What factors do you think make bullying possible and more likely? Explain
  - b. (Follow up). Describe the characteristics of an organisation where bullying is likely to flourish.
  
6. Let's now talk about your role as an HR professional in bullying situations.
  - a. What happens when someone has, or was to have a complaint about bullying?
  - b. What guides how you deal with reported cases of bullying, if and when reported?
  - c. How do you see your role in these situations? What would you like to do, but are not doing at the moment?
  - d. What support does your organisation offer to employees who encounter bullying or other forms of negative behaviour at work?
  - e. Would you be willing to allow me to review or have a copy of your company's policies relating to various forms of harassment? I will keep these documents confidential.

7. Knowing what you now know about bullying, I would like to understand what workplace bullying means to you.
  - a. What behaviour do you consider to be bullying in the workplace? Explain.
  - b. What are the characteristics of bullying?
  - c. How does bullying differ from other forms of negative behaviour at work such as discrimination and harassment?
  
8. In closing, is there anything else you want to talk about which we haven't covered?
  - a. What insights have you gained about bullying in the workplace?
  - b. What insights have you gained about factors that may lead individuals to label their negative experiences at work as bullying?
  - c. Do you have any questions for me? Would you like to see the study once completed? (if so, get e-mail address)
  - d. Do you mind serving as a member check? (explain what this means)

**APPENDIX E**  
**BYSTANDER FOCUS GROUP GUIDE**

## Appendix E

### Bystander focus group guide

Date:

Number of participants and demographics:

Male					Female				Total
	African	Coloured	Indian	White	African	Coloured	Indian	White	
Number									

Venue:

Time (Start):

End:

Moderator (Researcher):

Note-taker:

P.S. Expected duration: 1-2 hours

## The study's operational definition of workplace bullying

“Repeated and persistent negative acts towards one or more individual(s), which involve a perceived power imbalance and create a hostile work environment” (Salin, 2003:1214)

The key to bullying is frequency and duration. Single, isolated acts are therefore not considered bullying.

**STUDY INTRODUCTION:** Thank you for participating in this study. There is a dearth of workplace bullying research in South Africa and in workplace bystander research in general. This study is being conducted with a view to filling this knowledge gap and to gain a better understanding of organisational factors associated with bullying, from a bystander's perspective.

### **EXPLAIN CONSENT FORM AND ASK PARTICIPANT TO SIGN.**

#### **Process guidelines**

Participants will have a copy of this focus group discussion guide and will discuss amongst themselves the questions assigned to them. The group will have 20 minutes to discuss the questions provided in the focus group guide. Before the start of the discussion, the group must choose a person to write the participants' views on each of the questions. In addition, the group discussions will be tape recorded and transcribed. After the participants have completed recording their responses to the questions, the researcher will involve the group in recording key issues generated in the discussions on a flip chart as a way of checking out her own assessment of what emerged from the group.

Finally, the researcher will provide the participants with an opportunity to speak to her privately to record private comments after the session has ended (Kitzinger, 1995:301).

***Yes or No answers are not allowed – the researcher will explain the reasons why.***



## Group Questions

1. Describe what comes to mind when you hear the phrase “workplace bullying”.
2. Using the study’s definition of workplace bullying, in what ways does bullying occur in your workplace? Explain.
3. Describe the bullying incident you witnessed. What was the outcome of the bullying, if known?
4. Why do you think the person you witnessed being bullied was targeted?
5. Is there something you wish you could do/could have done, but think it is/was not possible?
6. Why do you think you have not been targeted?

7. What organisational factors do you think make bullying possible and more likely? Explain.

8. Describe the characteristics of an organisation where bullying is likely to flourish?

9. What do you think stops people from talking about bullying in the workplace?

10. Knowing what you now know about bullying, how does bullying differ from sexual harassment and other forms of negative behaviour at work?

Table 9-2 contains explanations of terms, and formal referenced definitions used in this thesis.

**Table 9-2: Referenced definitions and explanations of terms**

<b>Term</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Reference</b>
Apartheid	An all-encompassing South African political and social segregation system perpetuated through regulations and oppressive force against Blacks, Coloureds and Indians.	Used in thesis
Bully	The individual who demonstrates behaviour that is considered bullying.	Used in thesis
Bullying	“[R]epeated and persistent negative acts towards one or more individual(s), which involve power imbalance and create a hostile work environment.”	Salin (2003:1214)
Bystander	An employee who witness bullying but is not bullied herself / himself.	Used in thesis
Cape Flats	An area southeast of the central business district of Cape Town made up of expansive, low-lying townships of Coloured and African townships characterised by poverty and gang violence.	Used in thesis
Context	“Situational opportunities and constraints that affect the occurrence and meaning of organizational behavior as well as functional relationships between variables”.	Johns (2006:386)
Injustice; victim; discrimination; unfair labour practice; constructive dismissal.	Euphemisms of bullying preferred to the term “bullying”, used by participants in the study (bullying by other names).	Used in thesis
Macrosystem	“The overarching institutional patterns of the culture of subculture, such as the economic, social, educational, legal, and political systems, of which micro-, meso-, and exosystems are concrete manifestations.”	Bronfenbrenner (1977:515)
Microsystem	“The complex of relations between the developing person and environment in an immediate setting containing that person	Bronfenbrenner (1977:514)

	(e.g., home, school, etc)".	
Mesosystem	"...comprises the interrelations among major settings containing the developing person at a particular point...In sum, a mesosystem is a system of microsystems".	Bronfenbrenner (1977:515)
Exosystem	"An extension of the mesosystem embracing other specific social structures, both formal and informal, that do not themselves contain the developing person but impinge upon or encompass the immediate settings in which that person is found, and thereby influence, delimit, or even determine what goes on there. These structures include the major institutions of the society, both deliberately structured and spontaneously evolving..., and encompass among other structures, the world of work".	Bronfenbrenner (1977:515)
Macrosystem	"The overarching institutional patterns of the culture of subculture, such as the economic, social, educational, legal, and political systems, of which micro-, meso-, and exosystems are concrete manifestations."	Bronfenbrenner (1977:515)
Mobbing	"[E]motional assault [that] begins when an individual becomes a target of disrespectful and harmful behaviors, innuendo, rumors, and public discrediting; a hostile environment is created in which one individual gathers others to willingly, or unwillingly, participate in continuous malevolent actions to force a person out ... [A]ctions escalate into abusive and terrorizing behavior; ... victim feels increasingly helpless ... The individual experiences increasing distress, illness and social misery."	Davenport, Schwartz & Elliot (2002:33)
	"[H]ostile and unethical communication which is directed in a systematic way by one or a number of persons mainly toward one individual ... These actions take place often (almost every day) and over a long period (at least six months) and, because of this frequency and duration, result in considerable psychic, psychosomatic and social misery."	Leymann (1990:120)

Sexual harassment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unwelcome sexual attention from a person who knows or ought reasonably to know that such attention is unwelcome;</li> <li>• Unwelcome explicit or implicit behaviour, suggestions, messages or remarks of a sexual nature that have the effect of offending, intimidating or humiliating the complainant or a related person in circumstances which a reasonable person having regard to all the circumstances would have anticipated that the complainant or related person would be offended, humiliated or intimidated;</li> <li>• Implied or expressed promise of reward for complying with a sexually oriented request; or</li> <li>• Implied or expressed threat of reprisal or actual reprisal for refusal to comply with a sexually oriented request.</li> </ul>	Protection from Harassment Act 17 of 2011.
Social identity	“The individual’s knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him or his group membership”.	Tajfel (1972:292)
Social Identity Theory	An intergroup theory developed by a European social psychologist Henry Tajfel (1972) which provides a means for explaining how people think of themselves as members of social groups relative to other people who are members of social groups different to theirs. The theory also provides a vehicle for explaining how and why people behave in intergroup contexts.	Used in thesis
Target	Victim of bullying, or employee who is bullied.	Used in thesis

## **APPENDIX F**

### **ENLARGED SALIN'S (2003b) EXPANDED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Figure 9-2: Enlarged Salin's (2003b) expanded bullying conceptual framework

