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The hammer and the scalpel: A teacher's experience of workplace bullying

Thomas Leach

Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University, Lancaster, United Kingdom

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Abstract

Through autoethnography, I explore and reflect on my past experiences as a target of workplace bullying in two institutions, a university and language school aimed at adult education. By doing so, this autoethnography's purpose is to allow me to gain a deeper understanding why bullying takes place. I explore my own personal experiences of being bullied, how I responded to being bullied each time, and how being bullied changed me as a person. Through research and reflection, I found that these negative experiences fostered a spirit of resilience and growth. An outcome of bully marginally explored in the related literature.

1. To begin

I was never bullied at school. I wasn't popular or a bully myself but bullies never tried to fight me either. I started learning karate before I could form long-term memory, and one day a kid from school saw me fight at a demonstration. He told everyone in our year about the fight and it was enough to keep even curious bullies away.

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That sounds like a boast, but it isn't, I wouldn't consider myself to be tough at all, it's just a precursor to two points. First, it wasn't until I was an adult that I first experienced bullying. Second, there's something different about workplace bullying, being able to fight won't help you. The rules are different and they're not in your favour.

To share my experiences, I'll use a method of writing sometime referred to as "evocative" autoethnography. Though I'll talk about it in more detail later, autoethnography can be described as a research method which uses our own personal experiences and relationships as part of the research. It allows us to engage in meaningful self-reflection, to provide examples of how we dealt with and found meaning in our struggles and to push for social justice by bringing these issues to the fore (Adams et al. 2015, p1-2).

With this in mind, the purpose of this autoethnography is threefold, to look back at my experiences of being bullied, to reflect on how I responded each time, and to understand how it changed me.

2. All about workplace bullying

First, I need to talk about workplace bullying. It's very well-researched (Aleassa and Megdadi, 2014, p.157). It's common enough that it's been called a "silent epidemic" due to its prevalence but lack of focus compared to other forms of discrimination (Dereshiwsky, 2020, p.1211). In fact, it's suggested that somewhere between 15% (Nielsen and Einarsen, 2012, p.319) to around half of all employees get bullied at some point (Aleassa and Megdadi, 2014, p.158).

Bullying is also sometimes referred to as mobbing, workplace abuse, workplace harassment (Mikkelsen and Einarsen, 2002, p.397) scapegoating, health endangered leadership, and even petty tyranny (Einarsen, 2020, p.381). These names are synonyms with the only difference between mobbing and the other terms being that mobbing is used to refer to a group of perpetrators rather than just one (Dereshiwsky, 2020, p.1212). However, all of the terms refer to the same behaviour (Mikkelsen and Einarsen, 2002, p.397). This behaviour is said to last at least six months (Leymann, 1996, p.168) and occurs regularly (Caponecchia et al., 2020, p.105). It aims to discomfort, break down or torment (Einarsen, 1999, p.16-17) an unwilling target (Namie, 2003, p.4). Workplace bullying is normally psychological, with most attacks being covert (Namie, 2003, p.2) though bullying can become physical, it seldomly does (Einarsen, 1999, p.17. This typical discreetness can make the behaviours hard to pinpoint (Einarsen, 1999, p.18) and therefore prove (Beng, 2010, p.61).

Workplace bullying is considered as being 'status-blind' in that gender and race aren't considered contributing factors to why people are targeted (Namie, 2003, p.1). In addition, the laws which have been put in place with the intention of preventing discrimination against protected classes, do not apply to general workplace bullying (Dereshiwsky, 2020, p.1211). Of note is that only a quarter of bullying cases are reported to involve people from protected groups (Namie, 2003, p.2) which in part is probably due protected groups making up a smaller percentage of the researched countries' populations. As a result of this though, there is often no legal remedy (Namie, 2003, p.1) for the majority of incidents.

It may also surprise you that bullies are actually more often women and we typically bully our own gender (Namie, 2003, p.2). It's noteworthy that there's nearly always a power disparity between the bully and the bullied (Aleassa and Megdadi, 2014, p.160) with seventy to eighty per cent of perpetrators being a workplace superior (Einarsen, 1999, p.18), so it's a fight where the target has their hands tied from the start. Because of this, I use 'target' and not 'victim' because the idea of weakness and disempowerment (Dereshiwsky, 2020, p.1212) 'victim' conjures is inaccurate. Workplace targets aren't selected because they're weak, it's normally for the exact opposite reason (Dereshiwsky, 2020, p.1212). The thing that leaves us open to bullying is the power difference (Einarsen, 1999, p.18) that restrains us and leaves us disadvantaged.

Bullying escalates in frequency and aggressiveness over time (Einarsen, 2020, p.392). It can be put into three stages, the first being subtle and indirect, the second being more direct, with the target being made to feel increasingly isolated, and the third can introduce physical violence alongside the psychological attacks (Einarsen, 2020, p.392).

But who's targeted and why? There are two schools of thought on this. On one hand, there are those that think targets bring it on themselves, the other think targets are seen as a threat. Starting with the former, if a target doesn't behave as expected, it annoys others and paints a target on their back (Felson, 1992, p.4). This could be because the targets are seen as overachievers, have an overinflated belief in their abilities or are overly rigid (Einarsen, 1999, p.19). Targets are described as conscientious, literal-minded, naïve, or neurotic (Einarsen, 1999, p.20), and are often members of an out-group (Einarsen, 1999, p.21). Though negative, there are elements of truth to this. The other side's argument touches on similar ideas but more positively. They argue that

targets are picked because they're exceptionally competent, well-liked by others, highly moral, and resistant to domination (Dereshiwsky, 2020, p.1214). You could argue an overachiever or someone overly rigid is the same as someone exceptionally competent or highly moral, it just depends on your point of view.

It's strange that someone with arguably positive characteristics is targeted but bullies are said to feel threatened by their target, which triggers the negative behaviour (Dereshiwsky, 2020, p.1212). Sometimes the target is better skilled or qualified than the bully (Beng, 2010, p.63) which causes job insecurity and envy, making bullying an act of self-preservation (Einarsen, 1999, p.21). Perpetrators may feel threatened by their target's independence or social skills (Namie, 2003, p.3). Overall, the reasons are usually either competition, dominance, or power (Dereshiwsky, 2020, p.1213).

Bullies are described as selfish, inadequate, totally insensitive, evasive, manipulative, dishonest and persuasive, in that they are able to convince their superiors and peers that their behaviour is acceptable (Beng, 2010, p.63). They bully to hide their weaknesses and deficiencies (Beng, 2010, p.63), and calculate the risks and rewards of their actions (Einarsen, 1999, p.22), which might explain why bullying happens in phases of increased intensity as they become emboldened by the lack of repercussions. Sadly, senior leadership often protects bullies (Dereshiwsky, 2020, p.1215). Only 13% of cases end with the bully punished or fired (Namie, 2003, p.3).

Bullies can be put into four categories, the *Screaming Mimi, Constant Critic, Two-Headed Snake*, and the *Gatekeeper* (Namie, 2003, p.4). Though their names are amusing, their behaviours are less so. A *Screaming Mimi* is someone who sets the emotional mood of the room, deriving pleasure from public humiliation and using it to show what will happen if they're opposed (Namie, 2003, p.4). A *Constant Critic* is hyper-critical, constantly highlighting other people's perceived inabilities and flaws to distract people from noticing theirs (Namie, 2003, p.4). They invent errors to legitimise belittling others to keep them confused. They berate their targets privately, increasing their feelings of isolation (Namie, 2003, p.4). The *Two-Headed Snake* is a corporate climber, defaming those who block their path to promotion whilst ensuring that they're always believed by superiors (Namie, 2003, p.4). Finally, the *Gatekeeper*, obsessed with control, they manipulate variables to guarantee their target's failure to legitimise complaints they make against them (Namie, 2003, p.4).

It doesn't help that co-workers often don't support targeted colleagues either (Beng, 2010, p.64). This is known as 'bystander phenomenon', which is when people refrain from acting when they witness bullying, continuing as normal and inadvertently strengthening the bully (Zawadzki and Jensen, 2020, p.400). Reasons for this include a lack of understanding about the bullying taking place, incidents seeming trivial in isolation, fear of the bully, being under the bully's sway, or actually agreeing with the bully (Beng, 2010, p.65).

On average targets are bullied for twenty-two months (Namie, 2003, p.3). Methods used for attack are varied but can be categorised into five types. Those which attack the target's self-expression, social relationships, reputation, professional life, and finally, their physical and mental health (Beng, 2010, p.62). This might be carried out using anything from snubbing, to constantly criticising the target, to sudden, violent verbal or physical attacks (Dereshiwsky, 2020, p.1211-1212). Over time, these attacks affect the target's physical and mental well-being, causing issues such as anxiety, depression, fatigue, insomnia, nausea, suicidal thoughts (Caponecchia et al., 2020, p.105), loss of concentration, post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD), panic attacks (Namie, 2003, p.3), low self-esteem, stomach problems, back and headaches, anger, self-hatred (Mikkelsen and Einarsen, 2002, p.397) and cardiovascular stress-related diseases (Namie, 2003, p.3). All of these cause the target to become unproductive and unsuccessful (Namie, 2003, p.3), reducing their motivation, creativity, and causing an increase in errors (Aleassa and Megdadi, 2014, p.158).

It also increases turnover. Sadly, it is the target, not the bully, who will likely lose their job, either voluntarily or through dismissal, a 70% chance (Namie, 2003, p.3). Turnover doesn't only affect targets but institutions, too. Other negative effects on institutions include reduced productivity, profit, increased absenteeism, and the loss of customers (Aleassa and Megdadi, 2014, p.157). Lost staff need replacing and new staff need training, along with legal fees and reputational damages if the bullying becomes public knowledge (Caponecchia et al., 2020, p.105).

So why do institutions allow bullying? For bullying to take place, institutions must allow or even encourage it (Einarsen, 1999, p.21). There are characteristics that workplaces with bullying tendencies share, including a focus on outcomes, promoting, and rewarding people with dominating personalities over emotionally intelligent ones, short-term planning, a code of conduct that doesn't prevent bullying behaviours, nepotism, cronyism, encouraging fear as the company culture, and finally, the misuse of performance reviews (Namie, 2003, p.4).

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Academic writers have made recommendations with Namie (2003, p.5) creating a blueprint for employers, and Caponecchia, Branch and Murray (2020, p.104) creating a taxonomy of workplace intervention types. The former creating a new values-driven policy, credible enforcement procedures, restorative interventions, and training (Namie, 2003, p.5), and the later, a total of eleven intervention types (Caponecchia et al., 2020, p.104).

As mentioned, Namie's blueprint is a four-step plan for employers to follow. The first part is the creation of a *new values-driven policy* (2003, p.5). This involves making it clear that bullying is not part of the company culture, that all employees enjoy the same protections regardless of their protected class status, to clearly define what is considered bullying and to place bullying within the domain of health and safety, and finally to make sure people do not abuse the new protections with unnecessary complaints (Namie, 2003, p.5). The second part involves the implementation of third-party investigations, methods to change behaviour rather than zero tolerance and considering incidence of retaliation as separate to normal bullying (Namie, 2003, p.5). The third part includes offering coaching and counselling to perpetrators and victims, respectively (Namie, 2003, p.5). Finally, the fourth part recommends providing training and workshops on bullying to educate staff about appropriate behaviour (Namie, 2003, p.5).

Caponecchia's et al.'s (2020) eleven interventions came from analysing seventeen intervention types and evaluating which were most effective. The recommendations overlap considerably with Namie. The eleven recommended interventions were conducting investigations, providing codes of conducts, counselling, bullying awareness training, coaching, system-wide interventions, skills and training development, values statements, local resolution, and organizational redesign (p.121).

It's interesting that most of the suggestions from either academic wouldn't cause companies excessive amounts of time or money but when institutions aren't interested in implementing such ideas, how can bullying ever be tamed? That many workplaces seem to encourage this behaviour might explain why it remains so prevalent.

The literature on bullying is rich and I've only scratched the surface of areas relevant to my experience, so why write another paper at all? Truthfully, the literature helps us understand a great deal about bullying but it doesn't share the reality of a target's experience. We can read facts about bullying and what it does but that doesn't convey the emotional frustration or helplessness felt when it happens to you. Targets are often represented in an objective and anonymised way, not as a living person.

3. This is the way

I don't want my experience to be cold and statistical, it needs to be personal, to engage emotionally. Autoethnography is the only method that invokes "the self (auto), culture (ethno), and writing (graphy)" (Adams et al., 2015, p.46). It's a qualitative method of academic writing (Adams et al., 2015, p.22), which puts my experience at the centre of the investigation (Chang, 2008, p.62). The aim and benefit of using autoethnography is that it's constructed to produce meaningful, accessible, and evocative research about issues and experiences that are not typically discussed (Ellis et al., 2011, p.274). It is its evocativeness that makes autoethnography unique in the way it incorporates subjectivity and emotionality, rather than the sterile delivery of numbers and statistics (Ellis et al., 2011, p.274).

Though I did find examples of autoethnographies about bullying in higher education workplaces, namely Zawadski and Jensen (2020), and Pheko (2018). Both papers used analytical autoethnography, which sees itself as a subgenre of realist ethnography (Anderson, 2006, p.378). Traditional, sometimes referred to as 'evocative' autoethnography, and analytic autoethnography vary in their approaches. Analytic autoethnography bases itself around five key features which are that you are a member of the researched group, you use analytic reflexivity, you are a visible and active researcher in the text, provide dialogue with informants, and demonstrate a commitment to theoretical analysis (Anderson, 2006, p.378). The aim of analytic autoethnography is different to its evocative counterpart (Ellis et al., 2006, p.431), and, in my personal opinion, I think that causes it to lose its emotionality, which is what makes autoethnography stand out. It is because of this analytical approach that the stories from the aforementioned papers were personal but still made me feel like a "detached spectator" (Ellis and Bochner, 2006, p.431). Their writing still felt academic, trying to argue and persuade (Ellis and Bochner, 2006, p.441) when they could have conveyed their pain more fully.

In contrast, when I read Ronai's (1994-1995) reflections of the child sex abuse she suffered, I began to grasp an experience I could never otherwise understand, which saddened me and even made me feel sick to read. Gratefully, my own story is nowhere near as tragic, but that empathetic understanding and evocativeness is important.

And isn't autoethnography traditionally evocative? (Winkler, 2018, p.239) It's what makes it a distinct genre of writing (Ellis and Bochner, 2006, p.436) with more emphasis on "a plot, a moral and a point to the story" (Ellis and Bochner, 2006, p.438) than creating universal truths (Adams et al., 2015. p.9). An introspective journey with myself, the researcher as the researched (Doloriert and Sambrook, 2009, p.29) may even prove to be therapeutic (Ellis et al., 2011, p.280).

This autoethnography is about a transformative experience that altered my life and, in many ways, my approach to life. In autoethnography, this is known as an epiphany (Adams et al., 2015. p.47). I'll use three sources of information to retell the events.

First are my personal memories and reflections of my time at both places. Memories are valued as a building block of autoethnography (Chang, 2008, p.71) and one that should be considered equally valuable to written notes (Winkler, 2018, p.238), though they can still prove to be unruly and unreliable (Winkler, 2018, p.238). If I rely on personal memory alone, it would be reasonable to question the reliability of my story, and there may have been events that I have forgotten or remembered differently in reflection. This is how the second source, textual artifacts, adds reliability. Texts I created or helped create preserve some of my thoughts and feelings at the time (Chang, 2008, p.107) such as emails, Facebook messages and even an English as a Foreign Language teachers' forum. Each an effective way to trigger memories and reimmerse myself in my situation at that time. Finally, and perhaps most crucially, through interviews, as a way to connect my experiences with others (Adams et al., 2015, p.55). By using interviews, I could confirm or reject my memories (Chang, 2008, p.107) by discussing them with impartial participants who might recall a situation differently or even remind me of factors I'd forgotten. To do this, I conducted the interviews in small groups to better generate a flow of information and interaction around the topic (Chang, 2008, p.107).

I started with "grand-tour" questions such as asking about the general work environment or opening questions about specific people or events before progressing to "mini-tour" questions which focused on more specific details such as discussing why we felt people behaved in certain ways or why certain events took place or were allowed to take place. This took the interviews from a general or more broad line of questioning to more specific questions on particular aspects about the workplaces whilst keeping the interview style casual (Chang, 2008, p.105).

The interviews also work as a "conceptual encounter". But I'm getting ahead of myself. Although autoethnography is my methodology of choice, I borrow two principles (or strategies) from a more established methodological tradition, phenomenology, to guide my inquiry.

Phenomenology is difficult to define (Qutoshi, 2018, p.216) but it's sometimes referred to as the "philosophy of the perpetual beginner" (Anton, 2016, p.3). A constructivist/interpretivist paradigm (Qutoshi, 2018, p.218) used to provide thick description (Anton, 2016, p.3) of lived experience, reflected upon, free from prejudice (van Manen, 2007, p.12). Due to these attributes, I felt that phenomenology connected well with autoethnography. The focus on thick description and the structure, that as you'll see, vignettes provide, offered me a frame on which to hang my work. The workplace bullying I'll describe took place over years in one case and many months in the other. Without the inclusion parts of phenomenology, it could have been easy to get lost in it all.

So, in order to guide me, there are two elements I borrowed: the first relates to the interviews and is known as a 'conceptual encounter'. Conceptual encounter is extremely flexible (De Rivera, 2006, p.232), working as a kind of co-reflection (Zawadski and Jensen, 2020, p.402) which allows me to "map my personal experience" (McLeod, 2001, p.46). As outlined above, I'll interview some former colleagues who were present during my experiences.

The second phenomenological aspect is structured vignettes. Structured vignettes, as I plan to use them, are divided into five parts, which are context, vignette, emotional response, reflexivity, and strategies developed (Pitard, 2016, p.15). My experiences cover long periods of time with almost daily occurrences of bullying. I can't describe everything that happened but hopefully by providing context and describing a few events or vignettes in each institution, I can still provide a taste of what I encountered (Humphreys, 2005, p.842).

Context will provide an overview of the research sites, which in this case were a university in South East Asia and a language school for adult learners in the UK to increase awareness of the work environments (Pitard, 2016, p.6). Context will also provide further information about myself, the researched, in my roles as a teacher and assistant director of studies in these institutions, respectfully, offering, a sense of my experiences. The vignettes are more in-depth stories about particular events and stand-out moments which stimulate emotion and understanding (Pitard, 2016,

p.6). The emotional response outlines my immediate feelings at the time (Pitard, 2016, p.7). Reflexivity is then used to expand my understanding of that time and the interactions (Pitard, 2016, p.8) using the literature I summarised as a guide. Finally, strategies developed are ways I changed to create more positive future experiences (Pitard, 2016, p.8).

I should get started but keeping in mind that other people are in my story (Chang, 2008, p.68) and, from an ethical and personal viewpoint, I don't want their assistance with this paper to cause them any harm, so I have protected their identities (Adams et al., 2015. p.57), as much as possible by keeping the names of the institutions and people involved anonymous using pseudonyms for people instead.

On the other side of this, despite my experiences of being bullied, I don't want this paper to cause either the institutions or bullies harm either. This may seem odd considering what you are about to read but, this paper, whilst truthful is also from my own perspective and doesn't allow for defence or rebuttal. We are all only human and the problem with written text is that once it's out, it doesn't allow those trapped within its pages to evolve or change in the mind of the reader.

4. Hammer

I was excited to join the university for two reasons. I'd wanted to work for a university for most of my career, and three months prior to starting, I was burgled while at home and was desperate to get away from the house and city it happened in. The job was a fresh start in a new place.

The university was in a new 'city' but really it was the countryside. It was just the university, the apartments the teachers lived in and some restaurants. It was a welcomed change, the air was clean and there was a park to run around, which was enough for me to be happy.

The hierarchy of our department was quite flat with the academic director at the top, followed by the assistant director, lead teachers, who ran each level from elementary to upper-intermediate, and the teachers at the bottom.

Work started well, my first observation by the assistant director was great, I was in the 'top' team and I made friends with other teachers. My students were amazing, friendly, receptive, and appreciative to learn English. But the honeymoon period came to an end.

It started with stories. The assistant director soon left with a few choice words about the academic director, who I'll refer to as hammer. Whilst this name is too cool for him, it suits him because he was blunt, obtuse, and used his power to make his impact felt.

When more teachers left, more stories came out about verbal assaults and one physical assault he'd committed on a teacher while drunk, ways he'd sabotaged teachers by withholding important documents when they quit or not renewing contracts because he didn't like the teacher, even ways he'd sabotaged the previous academic director to get his position. He wasn't interested in your expertise or abilities. His only interest was in your loyalty and respect to him. This was a problem for me, I'm neither a leader nor a follower, and my loyalty is earned not demanded.

This problem got me passed over for promotion at least twice by other teachers fractionally experienced and qualified. In fact, most of the lead teachers were the least experienced teachers who showed the most loyalty. Often, the person observing you knew far less about teaching than you did. Awkwardly listening to them fumble through feedback, their faces showed they knew they didn't know what to say. One lead teacher, who was not a bully, even apologised and was quite honest that he found it weird he was giving me feedback considering the gap in our experience and qualifications.

This disparity, as suggested from that interaction, was not lost on the leads, and I was often asked for help by other teachers which didn't go unnoticed either. Most of the leads were wannabe tough guys, except one token woman so nobody could argue misogyny. One lead was even a former bouncer, and hammer made it clear by his own behaviour that his managers were allowed to intimidate teachers if they wanted.

At one point some teachers wrote a letter of complaint about hammer, sending it to his bosses. The letter was sent back to him to deal with. This action meant he knew he could get away with almost anything. All complaints stopped with him and he got the names of the teachers who'd complained.

Some teachers, after leaving, started a forum discussion to warn others against joining the university. It turned into a war between those who had left and the leads. Complaints would be posted and then leads would respond by shouting down those complainers as bad teachers and idiots.

Over time, things would escalate and then calm down, people would lose their jobs for random reasons. Hammer even fired a teacher when he was caught having an affair with her.

So many incidents happened, exacerbated by the fact that we all lived together, so you couldn't go home and forget about it because when you stepped outside your building, you were going to find people sitting on the steps drinking that you probably wanted to avoid.

When I did finally leave, hammer tried to sabotage me too, but I was lucky and had outside help from a friend from that country, which is the only reason he failed.

4.1 The party

I sat across from hammer for the first year of my twenty-six months there. We were polite but he always made me feel uncomfortable. Being sat near him, I learned quickly that we didn't see eye to eye on a lot of things, which wasn't good. Our only real run in, his attempted sabotage aside, was at a party he held. I didn't want to go but knew I had to. I had a few drinks, mingled, and then when most of the managers were intoxicated, I left, quietly. I pressed for the lift, waiting for its arrival when I heard a noise behind me. I turned to find hammer, drunkenly arm around shoulder with a lead teacher. Abuse followed along the lines of "yeah, you better leave" but less pleasant as they jeered and laughed. I didn't do anything, I just got in the elevator and left. What could I have done? What he said had surprised but didn't offend me. What concerned me was that his action meant it was okay to target me, and after that, I was.

4.2 Surprise attack

During my employment, especially once I'd shown that I was not hammer's type of person, I was moved around to different levels. At one point, I went to intermediate, whose lead I'll call tweezers. We had a complicated relationship, sometimes we were friendly and went running together. When he did bully me, it was like he did it just to conform. One day, he called me to his desk to ask me a question. After, he simply turned to me and said, "you're a bit of a cunt, aren't you?" There was no humour in his voice, no hint at a poor attempt at wit but no real malice either. He was simply stating, as a fact, that I was a cunt. There was nothing to say, no reply or retort I could make. The power only flowed one way.

4.3 Bloody sunday

One lead teacher took a dislike to me above all the others who I'll refer to as spanner, because, well, he was a bit of a spanner. While hammer made most of us feel uncomfortable, teachers spanner disliked were treated with aggression. He seemed to rationalise to himself why he targeted people. In my case, it was because I'm English. If you know me, you know that I'm far from patriotic but that didn't seem to matter. One incident that stayed with me for its bizarreness was when, during work, he accused me of committing the Bloody Sunday massacre. The accusation confused me as I didn't actually know anything about the event at the time. I would later learn that it took place eleven years before my birth.

4.4 Marvel

Spanner wasn't pleasant outside work either. One evening, when returning from watching the latest Marvel film, I found him sat on the steps of our apartment building, drunk. He asked me where I'd been so I told him. He started telling me how shit Marvel films are. I don't care if people like the same things as me, so when I said okay, he stood up to punch me. I wasn't worried, he was drunk and I was teaching karate to other teachers at the time. However, I knew that he could get away with punching me, defending myself would get me into trouble. Fortunately, his wife dragged him away before anything could happen.

4.5 Emotional response

By the end, I had a constant mix of emotions. There was the feeling of anxiety and uncertainty about what would happen each day at work and at night if I left my apartment. There was also frustration at myself, for not having seen things faster, and because under the right leadership, it could have been an amazing place. When an incident like the ones I described happened, my frustrations would increase further but there was nothing I could do about it, I just accepted them. I was lucky in that I put my feelings into my workouts. I always had enough anger to push myself in the gym. When I decided to leave, it was with a combination of fear and hope and when I did leave, it felt like a great weight had been lifted.

4.6 Reflection

Looking back, it's amazing and depressing to see how clearly the university fit into the literature as a stereotypical case of mobbing (Dereshiwsky, 2020, p.1212) where the managers took advantage of the power disparity (Aleassa

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and Megdadi, 2014, p.160). Hammer was the definition of a *Screaming Mimi* (Namie, 2003, p.5) whose lead teachers followed his example to more or less to the same affect, often behaving in selfish and insensitive ways (Beng, 2010, p.63). Likewise, by deferring all complaints about hammer back to him, the university not only allowed but seemingly encouraged a bullying culture (Einarsen, 1999, p.21), leaving the targets of bullying with no recourse but to quit.

Similarly, I was, as the literature described, an overachiever, conscientious and naïve (Einarsen, 1999, p.19) and a member an out-group (Einarsen, 1999, p.21). I was competent, well-liked by other teachers, highly moral and resistant to dominance (Dereshiwsky, 2020, p.1214) which annoyed and made the managers feel threatened (Dereshiwsky, 2020, p.1212). As one interviewee put it, "there was a disparity in experience, possibly, you could say intelligence, between managers and other staff" which no doubt led to the managers feeling insecure and sensitive which could have played a key part in their behaviour becoming increasingly toxic, once again agreeing with the existing literature.

Looking back, the online forum argument was a perfect analogy of everything outlined above. On this forum, some former teachers wrote about a wide variety of events and did get a little personal, describing managers as inefficient, inexperienced, inept, and generally disinterested whilst the director of studies was accused of only being interested in staying in charge. The incidents themselves and, to be honest, even the personal remarks were valid. It didn't take long for management to find the forum and to start responding. Instead of responding thoughtfully, a manager who referred to himself as 'realteacher' simply dismissed any complaints, stating that the teachers with legitimate concerns where failures and losers before talking about the financially package of working at the university as evidence why the complainers were wrong. He even emailed the forum to tell them to remove the complaints levied against the university, though the forum refused. Legitimate complaints being met with direct aggression and denial was the modus operandi of the university.

Ironically, as I was present at the university, I knew the identities of the managers who defended the university (and the complainers for that matter), 'realteacher' and his girlfriend, who was also a manager at that point, were fired because the academic manager grew concerned that they had become a threat to his position, an accusation 'realteacher' had said was not true of hammer.

It's also true that, as the literature suggests, for each target, including myself, the attacks started slowly and escalated with frequency and overtness over time (Einarsen, 2020, p.392), as the managers became more confident and realized that there wouldn't be any repercussions. This led to near constant feelings of anxiety, depression, and anger for me. In reflection, I withdrew myself from the situation as much as I could and often snuck around even after work and at the weekends to avoid confrontations, often flutily. It was a small place after all.

It didn't help that some of the other teachers acted as bystanders, burying their heads in the sand while myself and others were targeted (Zawadski and Jensen, 2020, p.400). Perhaps it made it easier for them to deal with the place if they pretended everything was okay.

4.7 Strategies developed

I recovered from the experience, but it changed me. I shed some of my naivety, no longer believing that systems always worked. I learnt the signs. I knew what to watch out for when I joined a workplace, and I knew that my best course of action was to get out. At the university, some of us naively believed we could change it for the better if we stayed long enough but now, I knew better. However, it seems I didn't learn well enough. I expected this kind of occurrence to happen in a country with lax laws and regulations but not in the UK. I was about to learn that I was very wrong.

5. Scalpel

After that place, I got a great job with an amazing mentor back in the city I'd left, but I grew tired of the country due to illness and so decided to leave. My parents' 60th birthdays and 40th wedding anniversary were around the corner so it seemed like good timing to go. But when I arrived back in the UK, my dad told me they were separating. I only mention this because life doesn't happen in isolation. Along with workplace bullying, during this time I will also have to help with my parents' divorce, my wife will have to return to the USA because of visa restrictions, one of my dogs will get a double enucleation, I will have reverse culture shock because it was the first time I'd lived in the UK since finishing university over a decade earlier, and finally, I would realise that my salary doesn't cover my basic cost of living.

I started my new job with nervous excitement. It was my first management level position. The work was interesting and varied. My day-to-day tasks included scheduling teachers' and students' and solving their problems. I would also teach, cover lessons, do teacher observations, provide

teacher training for teachers inside and outside the organisation. I also had regular contact with international sales offices about incoming students who I welcomed to the institution, giving inductions, and later, leaving speeches.

This time the honeymoon period was much shorter, my experience before meant I noticed the signs much sooner. Although it seemed welcoming at first, I became aware of the dog-eat-dog nature of the company. There was an expectation to learn quickly without training, including the company specific software. I also noticed that the institution's turnover was high. The director of studies, I'll call scalpel because she liked to make little cuts, saying things to make me feel uncomfortable or demoralized without being overt. She never chastised me publicly but had a manner that meant many some were afraid of her. She was the longest running member of staff and had been with the company for around twenty years, while most stayed for only around a year.

She saw everyone around her as stupid, criticising them all. Despite this, she seemed to struggle with the computer system that I'd taught myself to use. She seemed to do very little work as well. We worked different shifts, I would come in earlier to open the school and she would finish later and close the school. During the hours we worked together, she seemed to go for several cigarettes an hour with another manager she was friends with. While she seemed to be on a perpetual smoke break, I spent between nine to twelve hours a day (only eight of them paid) running around completing what seemed to be both our workloads. She seemed to have done almost nothing when I finished but when I would arrive the next morning, I would find random documents printed and placed on her desk as evidence of her work. The long hours were because the company expected us to start work before and finish after our contract hours with glances of disappointment or underhand comments sent our way if we kept to our proper schedule.

This time I knew better. I didn't think there was any point going over her head, no reason to believe anything would happen if I did. Plus, in the twenty years she had been there, I was told she had gotten rid of almost everyone else. I quietly found a new job and left.

5.1 Disliked

Scalpel had two consistent behaviours. The first was that she would be intentionally contrary about everything. If I stated an opinion on something, no matter how arbitrary, she would have the opposite opinion. For example, I was an IELTS examiner while she was a Cambridge Suites examiner. This was something that seemed to bother her as she felt the need to frequently tell me what an inferior exam IELTS was. I didn't have strong feelings about either exam but she seemed to think it would provoke me into an argument and seemed annoyed when it didn't. The other thing she would do is to make comments that were intended to hurt, confuse, demoralise, or break my confidence. After I'd been there a while, teachers and students would come to me instead of her, only going to her if I couldn't help. I didn't think anything of it but she must have because one day she turned to me and told me that the teachers didn't like me. Apparently, they'd come to her to complain. This is despite the fact that I never saw any of them interact with her and even after she told me this, they still always came to me first anyway.

5.2 Halloween

Similarly, as part of a Halloween event, I helped some of the teachers make a short movie. It was pretty fun and I enjoyed the excuse to spend time with them as I was often too busy and my position could often make me feel isolated as I was neither a teacher nor upper management. The movie was a horror spoof and we joked around making it. When I got back to the office one day, scalpel told me that work was no place for a sense of humour and that a teacher had complained about our light-hearted antics.

After making critical comments like this, she would often 'buy' me a coffee to make it seem like she was just being a mentor. The thing was, she'd been there so long, she got free coffee anyway, so in reality, she let me pay for my coffee most of the time.

5.3 Probation

The probation period was long, around four or five months in the end but only because scalpel set the end of probation meeting late by two months. When we entered the meeting, she was concealing a smile. She told me that she wasn't going to fire me but thought I wasn't picking things up fast enough, so she wanted to extend my probation for another three months. One of the people I interviewed thought this was unfair to as say as while working there, I had taught myself the job, even ran the school for two weeks alone when she'd gone on holiday, receiving help from another senior manager as my attempts to get her support were often met with condescention. Another manager and I were surprised at her decision but we could make guesses why she decided to extend my probation. Many comments during the meeting were about my positiveness, which she didn't see as a valuable trait. Secondly, I had told her I was working on getting a visa to bring my wife back, we suspect-

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ed she was pushing me to work even longer hours and cover more of her work. However, not wanting to get stuck like I was before, I'd already interviewed for my new job but I had to wait.

5.4 Final straw

A couple of days later, I was asked by the centre manager to go to another branch for extra training on short notice. Scalpel had obviously reported her probation findings, and he, being brand new to the centre, followed her guidance. It was only me at home now with our two dogs and nowhere to take them. On top of this, I was expected to pay for a hotel in London while away, and the low salary meant I had already used all of my savings and was getting further into debt. When I explained the situation, scalpel's suggestion was that I should get rid of my dogs. That night I got my new job and I quit the next morning. Scalpel was shocked, she didn't seem to think her behaviour would make me quit. My probation extension worked in my favour, I had to give almost no notice. A month later, I left the UK again. I didn't mind, the UK had felt like a foreign country to me anyway, and at least I got be with my wife again. A few months later, a friend and one of the people I interviewed for this paper was let go after having a work related nervous breakdown. They are fine now but it made me realise how lucky I had been to leave when I did.

5.5 Emotional response

I didn't feel the same desperation as last time, just the dawning realisation that I'd made a mistake. I saw the signs quicker but I still needed to work. I'd spent everything I had getting set up and on my dog's operation. But this time I learned to play along, never letting her know that I knew she was trying to manipulate me for her own purposes. I pretended to be oblivious while planning my exit. It was frustrating, watching her try to mess with me, knowing I had no power to respond. It was another good place ruined by poor management, but I didn't lament it this time, there was no point. I focused on my goal, to get back to my wife and that's what I did.

5.6 Reflection

As with the university, the organisation enabled if not actively encouraged bullying due to its competitiveness (Namie, 2003, p.4). In this case, it was bullying rather than mobbing with scalpel being the definition of a *Constant Critic* (Namie, 2003, p.3). What was different though was her rationale. At the university, anyone more qualified than the managers were seen as a threat, not just me, but I was not a threat to scalpel. She'd been there a long time. It didn't even seem to be that personal, except her dislike of my positivity (Namie, 2003, p.3). The interviewees seemed to think it was just who she was as a person.

This kind behaviour wasn't only aimed towards me. One interviewee described how scalpel had sent him an email about his leaving work five minutes early one day. Though he angrily replied and copied in a higher-level manager. The incident ended with scalpel being forced to apologise to him. Perhaps, in reflection, my experiences from the university where I had no legitimate way of solving these grievances had left me with the notion that it would be the same here. With that said, there were slight differences between our situations, I worked directly under scalpel whilst he worked separately and technically at the same level. They had very little in terms of a working relationship and so the dispute had little impact on either of them. Would the same have been true if I gone over her head or had I been too eager to run, afraid of being caught in a similar situation again?

5.7 Strategies developed

But as a result of working at this institution, I got even better at spotting the warning signs. Now I have a better idea of whether a workplace will encourage bullying without having to work there. A friend recently sent me a job advert I might have been interested in. I'd seen the university advertised quite often which meant a high turnover, which was a red flag. A review of the university confirmed it was a toxic workplace so I didn't apply.

On the other hand, it's also made me warier to take risks with jobs and less willing to fight for positive change, preferring to shut myself down and make my escape. It's taught me to compartmentalise my feelings and focus on what needs to be done instead often running instead of fighting.

6. Discussion and conclusion

There are realisations about my experiences that really struck me when I researched bullying and thought about my life at those times. Firstly, how both places fell into the troupes of workplaces that not only allowed but almost encouraged bullying behaviour, whether due to promoting the people who were the most dominant, the absence of a code of conduct, encouraging the use of fear, or allowing the misuse of performance reviews (Namie, 2003, p.4) both places did these things. Even the types of bullies are so well documented that my own fit perfectly into the *Screaming Mimi* and *Constant Critic* (Namie, 2003, p.3) descriptions.

Not to mention the parts that described my own nature in good and bad ways. I realize that I drew attention to myself because I had a passion for teaching that wasn't shared by those above, which pushed me into an out-group of like-minded and targeted people, and because I was conscientious and refused to be dominated (Einarsen, 1999, p.21).

Likewise, the bullies exhibited many of the traits from the literature. They were often selfish, manipulative, and dishonest (Beng, 2010, p.63) resorting to bullying to hide the fact they weren't very good at their jobs (Beng, 2010, p.63). They escalated their attacks in phases (Einarsen, 2020, p.392) and the outcomes were anxiety, depression, fatigue and more (Caponecchia et al., 2020, p.105), and amongst other things, a high turnover for both places (Aleassa and Megdadi, 2014, p.157).

And you know what? I checked when I was researching this, everyone I knew who was targeted left those places and nearly every manager who was a bully including hammer and scalpel are still in the same roles and it's been a long time since I worked at either place. This shows that the statistics on the targets being the ones who leave (Namie, 2003, p.3) and the bullies going unpunished are also true (Namie, 2003, p.3).

It is both staggering and depressing how accurately each facet of my experience matches the literature, except one. Going back through my memories, I remember the first time, how constantly frustrated I was, anxious and often depressed. I wanted to leave long before I ever got brave enough to do it. The second time the bullying gave me a sense of purpose instead. I knew what I had to do. I had a faster realisation of my situation with an immediate mission to get out of it. I kept my cards to my chest knowing they'd be used against me if I didn't, and in a quarter of the time, I was free.

I wanted to understand why this was and it led me to another effect of bullying which is barely covered in academic literature (van Heugten, 2012, p.292) which is resilience or antifragility. Resilience is the ability to adapt as a result of adversity, trauma, tragedy, or stress (Gattis, 2019, p.2) that softens the effects of bullying on our health (Meseguer-de-Pedro, 2019, p.180) whereas someone antifragile not only resists the trauma but gets better as a result, the challenge makes them learn, adapt, and grow (Tebeje, 2019, p.12).

I don't know if I would say I became antifragile from my experience but I became more resilient, able to recognise, understand and respond (Annor and Ampsonsah-Tawiah, 2020, p.126) the second time in a way that improved my situation when I struggled so much the first.

It wasn't the revelation I expected to come to when I first started this autoethnography but it's something positive I can take away from experiences that weren't. I did say this might be therapeutic.

At the beginning of this autoethnography I said I had three purposes for writing it, to look back at my experiences of being bullied, to reflect on how I responded each time, and to understand how it changed me.

As unpleasant as it was looking back, what surprised me was not the negative aspects of the experience but how I changed as a person, stripped of naivety, and given resilience. Neither were great experiences or times in my life but nothing is fully bad if you learn from it.

Ending this autoethnography, I realise that so much of the literature limits its focus on the who, why and immediate effects of bullying but not what happens after? Do we all become resilient? This autoethnography answers this question for me personally, but there's an opportunity to research further if this is the common outcome.

In fact, there are so many directions for research into workplace bullying to go, moving away from cold statistics. Papers with other people and groups who have been targeted to learn how their experiences compare, papers that discuss bullying from the point-of-view of the bully, and as hinted above, research into the longer-term effects of workplace bullying, and resilience.

The limitation of this paper is that it's only taken from my own perspective with evidence that only supports my side of events. Whilst everything I wrote is true, there is no way to understand these scenarios from the other side of the aisle. But with that said, I feel that this paper, as best as I could, did convey the frustration and helplessness of being a target of workplace bullying and illustrated what it's like to be a human being going through this phenomenon rather than just another number.

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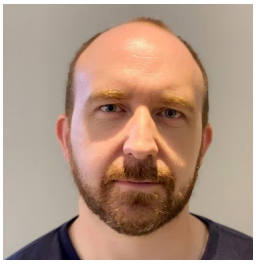
About the author



Thomas Leach is a PhD student in e-research and Technology Enhanced Learning at Lancaster University, UK. Thomas's research interests include self-regulated learning through online courses and instructional design. In addition, Thomas is interested in how this type of learning can provide more globally accessible education, especially in regions where high-quality education is unavailable. For example, how students might prepare themselves to complete internationally recognised courses which allow for their personal and national development.

Email: **t.m.leach@lancaster.ac.uk**

ORCID: **0000-0002-0693-7772**

Twitter: **@TomMLeach1**

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