The role of Human Resource Professionals (HRPs) in managing workplace bullying:

Perspectives from HRPs and Employee Representatives in Australia

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the perspectives of Human Resource Professionals (HRPs) and Employee Representatives (ERs) on the role of HRPs in managing workplace bullying.

Design/methodology/approach – Individual interviews were conducted with 12 HRPs and five ERs from a wide range of industries. Interview questions were open-ended and sought to gain insight on the views of the individual interviewees.

Findings – The findings address the role of HRPs in bullying scenarios and in the prevention of bullying. Regarding the role of HRPs in bullying, the responses of the participants suggest confusion and ambiguity, with a variety of roles being described ranging from a support-based role through to a protector of management. The participants also noted the importance of the HRP task of policy development, while a distrust of HRPs in bullying scenarios was mentioned. Regarding the effective management and prevention of bullying, the findings demonstrate that HRPs are viewed as having a central role through their particular responsibilities of creating and nurturing a positive organisational culture, as well as through engaging employees in the development of anti-bullying policies.

Practical implications – HRPs believe that they can contribute significantly to reducing workplace bullying through organisational culture (including educating staff and as role models of behaviour) and by engaging staff in the design of anti-bullying policies.

Originality – This paper contributes to the literature on workplace bullying by examining within the Australian context the perspectives of HRPs and ERs on how HRPs can prevent and manage workplace bullying.

Keywords: Workplace bullying, organisational culture, Human Resource Professionals, Australia

Paper type: Research paper

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1. Introduction

As is evident through the initiation of this Special Issue of *Personnel Review*, problematic behaviours in organisations are the focus of much attention from both academics and practitioners, with workplace bullying, the focus of this article, being no exception.

The key elements of the definition of workplace bullying include that negative behaviours occur repeatedly over a period of time, with the target ending up in an inferior position (Einarsen *et al.*, 2020). In Australia, where this particular study is based, an added element of importance and contextual factor in the definition of bullying is the health and safety of employees (see, for example, De Cieri *et al*., 2019), even if there may be slight variance between the relevant state jurisdictions. Other elements of the national context in Australia that may influence workplace bullying include the social norm of 'egalitarianism' (Davis, 2009), as well as the heavy emphasis on compliance with relevant workplace laws (including, but not limited to, the aforementioned workplace health and safety laws) (O'Rourke and Antioch, 2016). It has also been argued that in Australia workplace bullying tends to be treated as something that occurs at an individual level, with a shift to closer scrutiny of organisational, employment and cultural factors being necessary (Hutchinson, 2014), as well as having an excessive reliance on mediation of conflicts rather than the necessary focus on the antecedents of bullying (Jenkins, 2011).

There are a variety of negative consequences associated with workplace bullying for individuals (Mikkelsen *et al*., 2020) and organisations (Hoel *et al.*, 2020), necessitating action

to curb bullying behaviours. However, there is still rather limited information on the role of different actors – such as the role of Human Resource Professionals (HRPs) – in workplace bullying. HRPs have also been criticised at times for their lack of effectiveness in dealing with bullying (Cowan *et al.*, 2018). This study aims to provide valuable insight to assist in filling these gaps in knowledge.

The purpose of this study is to explore the role of Human Resource Professionals (HRPs) in managing and preventing workplace bullying. Specifically, the views of HRPs and Employee Representatives (ERs) in Australia will be sought to determine how these professionals see their role in managing workplace bullying, as well as their views on how bullying can be prevented.

2. The Role of HRM in managing workplace bullying: the literature

The general role of Human Resource Management (HRM) in organisations has been described in various ways. A key trend is the Strategic HR role, which Ulrich (1997) suggests includes HRPs being 'strategic partner', 'administrative expert', 'employee champion' and 'change agent'. These broad Strategic HR roles encompass many tasks related to the management of bullying in organisations. For instance, in a global study of HRPs it seems there is general consensus that the tasks HRPs must undertake to successfully deal with bullying include raising awareness, developing policies, mediation and intervention, redesigning work, addressing organisational culture and leadership (Salin *et al.*, 2020). The role of HRPs in bullying has also been categorised as a 'trusted listener', an 'objective, neutral third-party investigator', a 'management advisor' and a 'mediator/trainer/coach', with emotional labour associated with the execution of all of the aforementioned roles (Cowan and Fox, 2015).

There is a substantial body of literature discussing the role of HRM in workplace bullying, including several conceptual pieces on the role of HRM/HRPs in bullying scenarios (e.g., Cowan *et al.*, 2018; Lewis and Rayner, 2003; Salin, 2020). The aforementioned literature captures the discussion of the evolution of Personnel Management through Human Resource Management and Strategic HRM, 'Managerialist' HRM, 'Hard' HRM and 'Soft' HRM, expectations of the HR function, unitarism and pluralism, the varied influence of trade unions, organisational culture, and the interplay between HRPs and line-managers – all of which have been presented in the context of workplace bullying.

Although it is widely acknowledged that HR departments and HRPs have a key role in both preventing and managing bullying in the workplace, a limited number of studies have been conducted in which the role of HRPs in workplace bullying has been explored. Those studies that have been undertaken are based in several different countries – an important factor given that national context is central in HRM and in bullying research (Beale & Hoel, 2010; Salin, 2020) – and have employed various methodologies. Notable examples include studies conducted in the United States through interviews with HR professionals (Cowan 2011, 2012; Cowan and Fox, 2015) or via questionnaire surveys (Fox and Cowan, 2015), as well as those conducted in the United Kingdom via interviews (Harrington *et al*., 2012; Harrington *et al.*, 2015). A further example is a study conducted in New Zealand (Catley *et al.*, 2017) in which legal proceedings were analysed and thus indirectly capture data on the perspective of HRPs. A comparison between Britain and Sweden also identified the difference between the two countries regarding employer intervention, attributed to different patterns of workplace bullying, and the design and application of legal processes in the two countries (Beale and

Hoel, 2010). There have also been global analyses comparing approaches of HRPs in managing bullying from many national contexts (Salin *et al.*, 2020).

A review of the relevant studies suggests that HRM and HRPs are sometimes ineffective in dealing with workplace bullying. Recent summaries (e.g., Cowan *et al.*, 2018; Salin, 2020) incorporating data from both HRPs and employees demonstrate that when presented with scenarios of bullying, HRPs have generally been described as being 'passive', 'manager-centric', 'unsympathetic', 'untrustworthy' or in similarly sceptical terms. The results of one study demonstrated that when presented with complaints of bullying by employees, the HRPs took no action for months, and subsequently themselves joined the managers in bullying the complainants (D'Cruz and Noronha, 2010). Some researchers, such as Lewis and Rayner (2003) have highlighted the somewhat compromised position of HRM, affecting both the employment relationship in general as well as how HRM deals with bullying in particular: For example, the (in)ability of HRM to act impartially when feeling they have to act in the interest of management or have a 'loyalty to management' (Beale and Hoel, 2011).

Another key factor that is found in the literature to influence behaviour in organisations is 'ethical infrastructure' (Einarsen *et al.*, 2017; Einarsen *et al.*, 2019; Martin *et al.*, 2014; Tenbrunsel *et al.*, 2003), which facilitates the communication and reinforcement of ethical principles in organisations in both formal and informal ways, including the expected behaviour and conduct of staff. Thus, given the focus of organisational culture and policy development as ethical infrastructure, HR has an important responsibility in this regard.

As noted by Salin (2020), despite the foundations set by earlier research, our understanding of the role of the HR function in dealing with bullying, including the roles of HRPs in

prevention and intervention, is still rather limited. National context is also highlighted as a key factor in how bullying is managed (Beale and Hoel, 2010; Lewis and Rayner, 2003; Salin, 2020; Salin *et al.*, 2020), particularly given the influence of local practices and laws (see Lippel, 2010, for an overview). The aim of this paper is therefore to explore the views of Australian HRPs and their perceptions of their own role in managing and preventing workplace bullying. We will couple this with the view of ERs to explore how they see the role of HRPs in managing and preventing workplace bullying.

3. Method

This study was undertaken as part of a research project examining the perspectives of workplace bullying held by human resource professionals (HRPs) and employee representatives (ERs). Seventeen semi-structured individual interviews were conducted by the study's first two authors – 12 with HRPs and five with ERs, with the participants being drawn from the professional contacts of the aforementioned authors. Potential participants were sent an email containing an information sheet outlining the relevant details of the study as well as an invitation to be interviewed. Participation in the interviews was voluntary and anonymity was assured for all participants and their organisations. Each interview was conducted in a private room (including any electronic interviews) and they lasted 30-80 minutes.

The sample comprised 11 males and six females; their average age was 47 years. The interviewees had an average of 15 years of experience in their HR role. They were employed in a wide range of industries including business consulting, construction, education, employment services, health, and mining. Ethics approval was received from the relevant university Human Ethics Committee prior to the research commencing and informed consent

was received from each participant prior to the interviews. The interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed; the data were then coded manually, with the research aims in mind. In relation to the objectives of this study, the participants were asked the following questions: What do you think is the best way to prevent bullying?; What do you think is the best way to manage bullying?; and, What is HR's role in bullying situations?

Manual coding of the response data was used due to the limited number of interviews. The first author undertook the coding with the specific aims of this research in mind. The codes were data-driven, with common themes (Thematic Analysis: Braun and Clarke, 1996) as discussed by the interviewees emerging in their responses to the aforementioned questions. The interviewee transcripts were read and re-read carefully and the data were arranged in the corresponding codes with compilation of the relevant quotations. The co-authors assisted in this data analysis process to verify the themes drawn from the interview data.

Regarding the views of HRPs and ERs in the role of HRPs in bullying scenarios, the specific themes of 'confusion', 'variety', 'policy development', and 'distrust of HRPs' emerged from the analysis and will be presented. The views of HRPs and ERs in the management and prevention of bullying produced the themes 'organisational culture' and 'engagement of employees'. These themes will be the focus of the Findings section to follow.

4. Findings

This section will present the data based on questions posed to the interviewees on their understanding of the role that HRPs play in workplace bullying; this will be presented in data-driven themes. Firstly the views of HRPs and ERs on the role of HRP will be explored, followed by their views on the effective management and prevention of bullying.

4.1 HRP and ER views on the role of HRPs in workplace bullying

4.1.1 Confusion. The HRPs presented different thoughts on their role in bullying scenarios. There is a general vagueness in expressions on what HR's involvement should be, including suggestions on several roles depending on the severity of the bullying, as demonstrated by the following quotation:

> *"It depends on what point and the seriousness of the matter. Often it's as an advisor to a person who sees that they're being bullied and to give people an understanding of what options are available to them in the organisation at times even counselling somebody – although I think that's going over the line – but plenty of HR practitioners find themselves acting as counsellors in a scenario where they don't even know if it has substance or not, so typically I think HR is often very confused about this but in professional organisations HR understands that its role is to be objective and its role is to be a provider of options and potentially an investigator or a source of resources to ensure that there's fairness and natural justice… that's the case in the majority of large companies."* [HRP1]

The above quotation highlights confusion around the role of HR in general and when it is appropriate to apply the different roles, such as counselling a target of bullying, as well as facilitating an investigation and arriving at a fair outcome. The task of HRPs of 'investigating' bullying complaints was also mentioned by other participants.

> *"Our role is to first of all conduct the investigation – so that's to interview the person who's making the complaint and then separately the person against whom the complaint has been made, and then to bring them together whether there's any common ground. If deemed that there's unlikely to be a 'meeting of the minds' then I usually*

bring in an external mediator and liaise with them. And usually that mediator comes

from our Employee Assistance Program provider – an outside person." [HRP7]

Although the participant uses the term 'investigation' above, the ultimate aim seems to be to facilitate a 'mediation' between the parties.

4.1.2 Variety of roles. Given the general ambiguity and confusion about the role of HRPs in bullying scenarios, it is evident that there is a multitude of roles and tasks that may (or may not) be performed by HRPs. The actual role or task seems to depend on the situation. For instance, there may be a preference for the HRP to be an 'investigator' as noted above, but in other situations the preference may be as 'mediator' to resolve conflict rather than restorative justice via formal investigations of complaints, in which the role of mediation in bullying is limited (e.g. Keashly *et al.*, 2020). Perhaps the ideal approach for many HRPs is to act as a partner to line-management who may be ill-equipped to carry out the necessary tasks alone.

> *"What's interesting is that the responsibility for HR as an activity lies with the line*
> *manager. The HR function's role is to be advisor, confidant, mentor, the independent,*
> *business partner to assist the organisation. The worst case is where HR becomes the*
> *police; the best is where they're the advisors, not the 'doers'. They should be the*
> *coach. The mid-ground is where they may have to take over the investigation and serve*
> *both parties independently and hopefully come to a resolution."* [HRP9]

Whilst the above quotation places the 'investigator' task at the heart of the HRP's role as an advisor to line managers, this may be at odds with the task of 'conflict mediator' that was mentioned in an earlier quotation. The point of the independent investigation is ordinarily to

reach a conclusion with respect to whether the bullying complaint has merit and thus provide a just outcome, rather than arriving at a 'resolution between the parties'.

> *"Protecting the company, number one, of any sort of wrongdoing. But also I believe our role is to advise and support everyone involved to actually get a good investigation happening and managing an outcome – so not leading it. I think the manager of the person should be heavily involved, but again that usually doesn't happen because they're [managers] ill-equipped to do it. I think everyone would say that it should be HR's role to do it, which I disagree with strongly."* [HRP16]

As the quote above indicates, it seems in some instances the involvement of the HRP would occur only if the line-manager was ill-equipped to deal with the issue. It also emphasises HRs obligation to uphold the interest of the organisation, which may contradict the ideals of objectivity, independency and fairness raised by other participants. It may be the case that HR's involvement in bullying depends on several contextual factors, such as the size of the organisation (and subsequently the size of the HR department). The size of the organisation is also captured in the following response by an ER:

> *"… It depends on the size of the organisation, and HR's role within it. The role of HR varies widely. In a perfect world, I think HR's role is to achieve the best possible outcome for all parties and to keep people feeling safe, so they can go about doing their job."* [ER14]

Another interesting element of the above quote is emphasis on the achievement of the 'best possible outcome for all parties', which again highlights a 'mediation' role for HRPs, but this may not necessarily be the 'fairest' outcome. It seems there is a particular reluctance of HRPs to act as a truly independent investigator, presenting the facts of the case and reaching

a just conclusion, with the preference of taking on the role of mediator. One of the potential problems with a heavy emphasis on a 'mediation' role is that when a case comes to the attention of HR, the conflict may already be beyond the point where mediation realistically is possible (Keashly *et al.*, 2020).

4.1.3 Policy development. The lack of clear indication of HR's role in bullying seems problematic. It is also worth noting how ERs viewed the role of HRPs in bullying. One of the areas that ERs do expect to see HR input is in policy development, as demonstrated by the following responses from ERs:

> *"Good HR will make sure that there is a good policy in place. I think 80% of our worker's compensation claims are stress related, and I think about 80% of those stress claims would allege bullying. HRs role is making sure there is a good policy in place, make sure that people know what the policy is, and make sure that there are people who targets can report to. Also, HR people should be skilled themselves on how to deal with initial mediation and initial contact with people, or be prepared to find someone who is. HR should treat bullying seriously straight away." [ER11]*

The HRP task of policy development is linked to 'ethical infrastructure', as noted earlier. Although there is necessity for anti-bullying policy, in some instances such policies are not taken seriously and thus lose their power (Hutchinson, 2014), as was noted by the following participant:

> *"They [HR] normally formulate the policy. Whether they follow the policy is another thing. Some take it more seriously than others. It depends on the OH&S [occupational health and safety] person in the company. The bigger companies are generally very*

professional about it. Then you've got your 20-man crews and they have somebody who is a HR person, a foreman, a 'this', a 'that', and they're probably the ones are doing it [the bullying]." [ER13]

The obligations for health and safety in the workplace are central to bullying considerations in Australia, but as noted by the participant above, the size of the organisation may influence adherence to policy and there is limited recourse in smaller organisations where the managers are also the perpetrators of the bullying.

4.1.4 Distrust of HRPs. Another repeated theme was an element of 'distrust' of HR in bullying scenarios, specifically in the sense of HR acting in the 'managerialist' perspective, as noted by the following ER:

"I can only speak from my experience, and in my experience HR is an arm of management. HR are charged with the responsibility of making sure that the management achieves its objectives. All of the staff in HR report to a senior manager through the hierarchy, so HR in terms of its governance and its hierarchy is quite clearly within the management realm now. The role of HR now, unfortunately, is to look after the interests of the organisation, and the union is charged with the responsibility of looking after its union members. Management and HR should follow the set policies and procedures, but in many circumstances they do all kinds of things but do not follow the set policy and procedures." [ER12]

This quotation from an ER is in agreement with the earlier comment of a HRP on the role of HRPs to protect the interests of the organisation against any wrongdoings. One could argue that it is in the interest of the organisation to deal with complaints of bullying in a fair manner

(including when such complaints are against management). As has been noted in other research (e.g., Beale and Hoel, 2011) HRM has a loyalty to management and any perceived failure to follow their own policies adds to distrust. Another ER made a similar remark:

> *"I see HR's role as being a compromised role. If there is a report of bullying and if an investigation is appropriate, quite often it will be HR that does that investigation. But HR are not impartial because they work for the employer, there is vicarious liability and all of that type of thing, the employer's obligations under the Occupational Health and Safety laws. HR is necessarily on the side of the employer, so HR is not impartial. So I think that HR has a compromised role, even though most places would have HR responsible for an investigation. It's a challenging thing, and wherever possible the Union tries to encourage an external investigator." [ER15]*

This finding was observed also in Harrington *et al.* (2012) where evidence was found of HRPs' distrust of managers' ability to effectively deliver HRM practices, particularly performance management. In cases of workplace bullying, HRPs in Australia have a clear aim to minimise any liability on the part of the organisation and are arguably biased from the outset.

4.2 HRP and ER views on effective management and prevention of bullying

The findings will now focus on the prevention of bullying before focusing on managing workplace bullying when it occurs and finally on the specific roles that HRPs can play in stopping this destructive behaviour in organisations. It is worthwhile noting that it is perhaps the willingness and competence of the HRPs themselves (not HRM activities nor HRM departments *per se*) that may be the key determinants of effectively dealing with bullying.

Culture and employee engagement featured prominently in the responses as being key ways to prevent bullying.

4.2.1 Organisational culture. The following quotations from three HRPs highlight that, in their view, in terms of prevention, legal considerations are secondary to culture in an organisation and the necessity for clarity for staff around what constitutes acceptable as opposed to unacceptable behaviour:

> *"...that ultimately the organisation is taking care of culture so taking the emphasis away from the law and placing the emphasis on prescribed behaviours that are from the very top regarded as ok or not ok. And everybody is very clear about them."* [HRP1]

> *"I think the best way to prevent bullying is to ensure that all employees in a workgroup have a full understanding of the accepted behaviours within the workgroup and the workplace. The more the organisation or the workgroup drills the issue into the staff, the more 'front-of-mind' it becomes and the more embedded it becomes in the culture."* [HRP3]

> *"I think education. We ...have a Work Health and Safety program. Those cover employee and manager responsibilities around work health and safety, sexual harassment and bullying. And so right from the start we make it clear that that sort of behaviour is not acceptable... And the next thing is you must have the policies to back it up. And also, it's essential that you set a good example. If we're firm on induction and we're firm on the policy, but then if the person experiences something else when working here in the organisation, then we're being hypocritical."* [HRP6]

The above quotations emphasise the need for senior management to take the lead in communicating to the workforce what is expected as far as behavioural standards are concerned. The last of these quotations emphasises the importance of regular communication and reinforcement of correct behaviour in order to make it habitual, embedding it in the local culture, Management's educational role is highlighted for cultural change to occur. Clear communication is important and extends beyond essential employee induction and policies to limiting any uncertainty that could be a precursor to bullying behaviour, as suggested by the following participant:

"... if there is insufficient information [about positions, roles and company performance] sometimes it threatens people's security and when people are insecure you'll see a lot of silly behaviours." [HRP17]

A degree of self-awareness in terms of the quality of interactions of managers with staff is recognised as influencing organisational culture. This is significant as it suggests that while policies are recognised as necessary, they are not viewed as sufficient to keep bullying out of organisations:

"Essentially, what's important is implementation of policies and there being a culture whereby people feel that they can make reports of bullying, and where there is actual active management participation and role modelling and that type of thing. Just having a bit of paper is not enough." [ER15]

The particular significance that is attached to management actions in setting standards and behavioural expectations is further recognised in the following quotations:

"I think it's through strong leadership and it has to start at the top. The management set the agenda and they define the culture and what's acceptable and what's not acceptable. I think it's always a lack of leadership." [HRP5]

"I think you've got to have clear statements about what kind of behaviour is acceptable and what is not acceptable. You should have really good policies in place about bullying, so it is clear and the policies are really understood by people. I think it has got a lot to do with actual climate that you – as the manager of a workplace – engender in that workplace. Everything that a manager does in terms of interactions with other people change the climate just a little bit, and the sum total of those little changes to the climate is a positive workplace culture. It is hard to say 'I'm going to create a particular culture', but if you have good policies and you have clear understandings of what is acceptable and what is not, and you work really hard on the organisational climate, then you can effect a good workplace culture." [ER11]

As noted in the latter quotation above, role modelling by management is seen to reinforce quality policy development and fair processes – part of the ethical infrastructure of the organisation. It is also noteworthy that, in terms of education to drive cultural change, the HRPs do not all see this responsibility as belonging to them alone, but many do share the view that HRPs have a particular responsibility in most organisations for raising awareness of bullying:

"Although it hasn't always worked in our favour, I think getting people aware of what bullying is, knowing what the process is if they are feeling bullied, empowering them to speak up and to let the other person know that they're feeling uncomfortable and that

it's unacceptable and then escalating it through their manager or HR… Also having an

organisational culture that doesn't tolerate bulling is important." [HRP4].

The quotations also highlight the need to create and nurture a culture where people feel able and safe to challenge bullying behaviour. They also indicate the importance of having in place formal procedures to address any complaint of bullying, and organisational responses which reinforce a message that bullying is not tolerated (Brodsky, 1976). However, by evoking the idea that greater awareness of bullying could work against the organisation, "*it hasn't always worked in our favour*", one might sense a frustration among this HRP that some people may raise concerns unnecessarily. But, as the quotation below suggests, rather than fearing that the term is misused, it is the role of the organisation to teach employees what is considered bullying, and what is not, and informing employees about their rights:

"I don't think it (bullying) should be seen as a 'dirty word', in terms of educating

people about what bullying is and what it isn't – it should be out there… what people's

rights are around making a complaint about being bullied." [HRP8]

It is also the view of some HRPs that some training is poorly designed and thus creates subsequent issues:

"I've seen some bullying training where people walk out of there and feel like they

can't talk to anybody any more. I think training needs to be really down-to-earth and

practical. I think individuals as well as companies need to understand what the

possible ramifications can be – and I think if people knew that they'd be a little bit

more careful in how they spoke to each other, but not take it to the extent of such

political correctness that you can stop talking to people." [HRP16]

The above extract emphasises the need to carry out training to instil caution with respect to how people treat each other at work, but warns against creating a climate where people are fearful of interacting with each other.

4.2.2 Engagement of employees. A recognition that HRPs are most effective in their work when they facilitate employee involvement in the design – and therefore ownership – of behavioural guidelines and policies is also highlighted. This is seen as being particularly significant in an egalitarian national culture such as Australia:

> *"We basically need to train people to say what's acceptable around here. ...We've found that it's best to give guidelines, packaged in a language that's comfortable for them, that references a standard that they've been involved in developing using common nomenclature – rather than being confrontational. It's a standard that they've actually themselves been involved in developing – it therefore resonates strongly. A more directly confrontational approach, without their own involvement, isn't as useful or productive with Australians."* [HRP9]

Whilst collectively (through dialogue) setting behavioural standards has merit, one may argue that organisations and HR cannot shy away from calling out behaviour that breaches regulations, including where such behaviour may be commonplace and ingrained within a local culture or sub-culture.

A sense of involvement or engagement in the organisation is also viewed as significant for preventing bullying, as is alluded to in the following quotation:

> *"The greatest mitigating factor is where people feel engaged in an organisation. And, in particular, the person they report to and who they feel that if something's not right in*

relation to behaviour they can talk about it, without being victimised, and with the person being able to deal with it in a fair way..." [HRP1]

"... it [the bullying policy] will have a clear consultative process in place that has been worked-through with a whole range of staff. Staff have their say in how the principles of natural justice will apply. There will be a process in place which has been agreed upon by staff in that organisation and it has to involve all employees including the grass-roots level of the organisation." [HRP2]

Equally, the extract above points to the importance of having trust in internal processes in order to feel safe in reporting their experience.

5. Discussion

The interview data from this exploratory study provide an insight to the perspectives of both HRPs and ERs in Australia on the role played by HRPs managing and preventing workplace bullying. Importantly, given the negative consequences associated with workplace bullying and the criticism of HRPs for a lack of effectiveness in combating it, the findings of this study enhance our understanding of how HRPs and ERs see the role of HRPs as actors in workplace bullying. It is apparent that several key themes emerge from the data. These themes are important to understanding how HRPs attempt to minimise the probability of bullying occurring in organisations, as well as how they attempt to effectively manage bullying where it does arise.

In terms of the role of HRPs in workplace bullying, the responses of the participants produced four major themes. The first theme of 'confusion' highlighted that there is

ambiguity among HRPs and ERs on the role of HRPs in bullying scenarios, with a further theme of 'variety' indicating that HRPs have a multitude of roles ranging from a mediator of conflict through to the primary responsibility of protecting the organisation from litigation. The third theme centred on the HRPs' tasks in policy development, with the final theme of 'distrust of HRPs' being a perception held particularly by the ERs in the study.

Regarding the effective management and prevention of bullying, the responses of the HRPs and ERs in this study highlighted two key features. Firstly, organisational culture was considered to be important in minimising bullying – this incorporated HR's role in educating staff on matters related to bullying, clear and open communication, as well as the managers themselves exemplifying the behavioural standards in organisations. Secondly, the engagement of employees was also considered important, including in the development of anti-bullying policies.

5.1 Implications for Theory and Practice

As has been noted in several studies (e.g., Beirne and Hunter, 2013; Rayner and Lewis, 2020; Woodrow and Guest, 2014; Vartia and Leka, 2011), even the highest standard of HRM policy on workplace bullying is inadequate if that policy is not well implemented by HRPs or managers in organisations. Also, 'high-quality' HRM practices have been found to be linked to ethical infrastructure (both formal and informal) to combat workplace bullying, irrespective of the firm's size or its financial means (Einarsen *et al.*, 2019). Interestingly, several of the participants in this research observed that the size of the organisation may influence the extent of involvement of HRPs in bullying, specifically in terms of whether dealing with bullying should primarily occur at the line-manager level with HR playing a

supporting role, as well as the influencing the timing in which any HRP intervention may occur.

There was significant recognition by both the HRPs and the ERs that clarity in policy is a significant prerequisite to effectively countering bullying – but any organisation that limits itself to the design of quality policy alone will not succeed in countering this destructive phenomenon from the workplace (Rayner & Lewis, 2020). It was apparent from the data that policy is regarded as merely a first step in an effective approach to countering bullying. Even the approach taken in the design of good policies was highlighted as being significant. One benefit of involving staff directly in the design of policies is that it facilitates the development of a sense of ownership of the policy and increase employee feelings of belonging and being valued by the organisation. In this, such policies are much more likely to be absorbed and effectively influential on behaviour. Such involvement also helps use language that has clarity and simplicity for the intended recipient and is again more likely to be influential in discouraging bullying.

Educating and training staff about what constitutes bullying and what is acceptable and what is not acceptable was mentioned by almost all interviewees as being critical. It is significant that HRPs and ERs both nominated this undertaking as critical in countering bullying. The exact form that this training takes was not detailed by all interviewees but the desirability of refreshing people on this was noted.

The interview data demonstrate that HRPs and ERs appreciate that there needs to be consistency between policies and action – particularly when the action belongs to managers. Any inconsistency or failure of actions to live up to policy and behavioural expectations will

significantly undermine or erode the effectiveness of the organisation's attempts to eradicate bullying. This observation is in accord with Harrington *et al*'s (2012) finding that inconsistencies between manager and employee accounts can undermine trust and reduce perceptions of reliability of future reports of bullying. Insight was provided that any inconsistencies will feedback directly into the shaping of organisational culture.

The development of an organisational culture where bullying has no place was highlighted in the interview data of both the HRPs and the ERs. Most of the interviewees highlighted the critical role played by culture and the responsibility that HRP's have in this domain. The role of strong leadership in developing a positive organisational culture was seen as critical. The high degree of agreement between the two groups of interviewees on this was notable.

National context has been demonstrated to be important in how negative behaviours are interpreted and acted upon (Salin *et al*., 2019). In Australia, where workplace bullying is mostly viewed as an issue of 'occupational health and safety', it remains important that HRPs fulfil their obligations of employee wellbeing in both preventing and managing workplace bullying (De Cieri *et al*., 2019).

5.2 Limitations and Future Research

This research involved a sample of 17 professional interviewees – 12 HRPs and 5 ERs. The study was exploratory in nature. The themes that emerged in the interviews were repeated by several participants, suggesting that while a larger sample might be theoretically preferable, it may well not have altered the results of the study.

The views of HRPs and ERs are significant as they would be expected in most organisations to play a prominent role in shaping organisational culture. Nevertheless, the inclusion in the study of some line managers and lower-level employees might enrich the data by broadening the included perspectives. It could be expected that the inclusion of such staff would provide first-hand experience of the targets of the bullying phenomenon. It is also possible that the inclusion of only these two groups biases the sample towards organisations with clearly defined HR departments – which would tend to be larger organisations. It may be useful in future research to control for size of the organisation by ensuring the inclusion of HRPs and ERs from a range of organisational sizes.

A final limitation is that the study was undertaken in one particular country – Australia. As such, the results of the study should be interpreted with an appreciation of aspects of Australian culture, history and society that are distinct from other countries. But fully acknowledging the role of the context is also one of the study's strengths. Differences in the cultures of countries may lead to significant differences in results if this study were replicated in another country (see, for example, Casimir *et al.*, 2012, Paull and Omari 2016; Salin 2019; Salin *et al.* , 2019; 2020); other differences may arise due to different legal frameworks, sociological factors, gender roles, economic development, history. Further research could test the generalisability of these findings in other contexts.

5.3 Concluding comments

This study explored the perspectives of HRPs and ERs on the role of HRPs in preventing and managing workplace bullying. Including ERs in the sample of interviewees broadened the research beyond a self-reflection by HR. The findings demonstrate a high degree of consistency in the perspectives of the two groups; this consistency suggests that efforts to

develop positive organisational culture, clear policies, to educate and train staff, and to provide and encourage 'ownership' of policies are all significant from the perspectives of both HRPs and ERs. The findings offer significant encouragement for those working to effect such undertakings.

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