Protecting My Interests:
HRM and Targets' Coping with Workplace Bullying

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Based on a study rooted in van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology, conducted with agents working in international facing call centers in Mumbai and Bangalore, India, this paper describes targets' coping with workplace bullying. Data were gathered through conversational interviews and were subject to sententious and selective thematic analyses. The core theme of "protecting my interests" displayed two prominent features: the presence of stages and the critical role of HRM in influencing multiple facets of the experience. Major themes, organized around these defining characteristics, include experiencing confusion, engaging organizational options, moving inwards and exiting the organization. The findings break new ground in empirically uncovering the organization's etiological role in workplace bullying, apart from reconceptualizing targets' exit coping response. Key Words: Workplace Bullying, Targets, Coping, Human Resource Management, and India

Introduction

The study of interpersonal bullying at the workplace originated in Scandinavia in the 1980s with the work of Heinz Leymann who used the term "mobbing" to describe the phenomenon (Duffy & Sperry, 2007; Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003; Leymann, 1996). Evolving through research over time, interpersonal bullying at work has come to be defined as

> …harassing, offending, socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone's work tasks. In order for the label bullying (or mobbing) to be applied to a particular activity, interaction or process it has to occur repeatedly and regularly (e.g., weekly) and over a period of time (e.g., about six months). Bullying is an escalating process in the course of which the person confronted ends up in an inferior position and becomes the target of systematic negative social acts. A conflict cannot be called bullying if the incident is an isolated event of if two parties of approximately equal `strength' are in conflict. (Einarsen et al., p. 15)

The terms "bullying" and "mobbing" are increasingly being used interchangeably though earlier they signified different foci of the same phenomenon. That is, while bullying and mobbing include a victim orientation and the negative impact on targets, bullying focuses on actors and mobbing focuses on targets (Zapf & Einarsen, 2005). In this paper, the contemporary perspective is adopted and the term bullying is used. Bullying is a social stressor (Zapf, Knorz, & Kulla, 1996) that precipitates strain and trauma in targets with

serious detrimental effects on their health and well-being. Low self-esteem, poor self-confidence, decreased self-worth, self-hatred, sleep problems, anxiety, anger, depression, nervousness, insecurity, suspicion, bitterness, concentration difficulties, chronic fatigue and various somatic problems as well as suicidal thoughts are commonly reported (Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2003).

Empirical research on targets' coping with workplace bullying which looks at targets' "cognitive and behavioral efforts to master, reduce, or tolerate the internal and/or external demands that are created by the stressful transaction" (Folkman, 1984, p. 843) is limited. Studies emphasize the predominance of emotion-focused, passive and avoidant strategies. Hogh and Dofradottir (2001) found problem solving being used less often and avoidance and resignation being used more often by those exposed to bullying compared to those not exposed to bullying. Rayner (1997) pointed out that non-bullied respondents anticipated a more proactive reaction in terms of confronting the bully, consulting personnel, seeing the union and seeking help from colleagues compared to those who were actually bullied. The latter group was much higher on doing nothing and much lower on using supportive services. Twenty-seven percent of the latter group quit their jobs. Rayner's (1999) later work confirms these findings. Olafsson and Johannsdottir (2004) identified four clusters of coping strategies including assertiveness, seeking help, avoidance and doing nothing, arranged on an active-passive continuum that reflects the severity or duration of the bullying situation. Their findings confirmed gender stereotypes, highlighting that men sought help less and relied on avoidance less while being more assertive than women. Increased and prolonged bullying was associated with the use of passive coping strategies comprising avoidance and doing nothing. Niedl's (1996) inquiry, rooted in Withey and Cooper's EVLN (exit-voice-loyalty-neglect) model, indicated that most targets first reacted to the experience of bullying with constructive coping strategies (voice and/or loyalty) whereby they attempted to resolve the situation while maintaining their commitment to the organization. But after perceiving that problem solving was not possible, targets resorted to destructive coping strategies (neglect and/or exit) which involved reducing commitment and leaving the organization, thereby adversely affecting organizational interests. Zapf and Gross, using Rahim and Magner's conflict management strategies, showed that while targets began with active and constructive strategies such as integration, they ended up trying to escape the situation after their efforts did not lead to a solution. Looking at their findings in terms of Withey and Cooper's model, Zapf and Gross found that while all participants engaged active and constructive strategies at some stage to resolve the situation, their attempts proved unsuccessful and they ended up choosing exit, seen as an active but destructive strategy. The main advice given by participants in Zapf and Gross's (2001) to other targets was to leave the organization, followed by seeking support. Nonetheless, exit was considered to be destructive for the individual. This was so not only because targets felt forced to leave the organization while bullies stayed on, resulting in a sense of unfairness, but also because, in their new jobs, targets tended to accept work conditions (including position, tasks and salary) substantially worse than those in the firm where they had been bullied (Zapf & Gross). Taken together, the aforementioned studies support the position that targets are unable to successfully apply coping strategies to ameliorate or resolve the situation and usually exit the organization, a response considered to be unsuccessful, maladaptive, avoidant, passive and destructive for the individual and for the organization.

The role of the organization is critical in determining the outcome of targets' coping response. Knorz and Zapf (1996 as cited in Zapf & Gross, 2001) demonstrate that objective changes in the work situation through the third party intervention of higher management facilitate successful coping even though such intervention did not encompass re-establishing the pre-bullying situation but involved separating the bully and the target. Similarly, Zapf and Gross underscore that successful targets operate within the organizational framework in order to resolve the problem. Rayner (1999) adds to this perspective by showing how the perceived effectiveness of helping structures within organizations could be an underlying issue for high exit rates of targets. She found that in seeking redressal, targets go either to the bully directly, to the bully's boss, to personnel or to the union representative or make a group complaint, and generally "nothing" is the reported outcome of these actions. Being labelled troublemaker, worsening of the bullying and having the allegation overruled were some of the other outcomes. Only in a few instances did bullying stop or did the bully get disciplined. Indeed, the critical role of the organization in influencing the course of workplace bullying has earlier been highlighted in Leymann's (1996) processual model, reinforcing emerging findings in the workplace bullying-target coping thematic area.

The contribution of human resource management (HRM) to targets' coping with interpersonal bullying at work has so far not been empirically explored. This paper addresses this important gap. Based on an inquiry of targets' experiences of interpersonal bullying in India's international facing call centers, the paper captures processual, temporal and contextual dimensions of targets' coping behavior, through which the critical influence of HRM stands out.

At the outset, it is relevant for readers to know more about the authors and their interest and involvement in the research inquiry. Both authors are social scientists specializing in organizational behavior (OB). Both authors have worked extensively with qualitative research methods, especially phenomenology but also ethnography and case studies. While both authors share an interest in organizational control, the first author has also been researching workplace bullying while the second author has also been researching industrial relations. For the last five years, both the authors have been jointly studying India's ITES-BPO (Information Technology Enabled Services-Business Process Outsourcing) sector, focusing on employee experiences of work. A phenomenological approach was adopted in which the core theme of being professional linked to socioideological control, hard and soft HRM models and inclusivist and exclusivist HR (human resource) strategies emerged (Study A; readers are referred to Noronha & D'Cruz, 2009, for details key terms are explained in footnote[1]). In the course of this

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[1] Socioideological control refers to efforts to persuade employees to adapt to certain values, norms and ideas about what is good, important, praiseworthy, etc., in terms of work and organizational life (Alvesson & Karreman, 2004).

Hard HRM, indicating utilitarian instrumentalism, stresses HRM's focus on the crucial importance of the close integration of human resources policies, systems, and activities with business strategy, requiring that they are not only logically consistent with and supportive of business objectives, but achieve this effect by their own coherence. From this perspective, employees are regarded as a headcount resource to be managed in exactly the same rational, impersonal way as any other resource, i.e., to be exploited for maximal economic return. Soft HRM, indicating developmental humanism, while still emphasizing the importance of integrating HR policies with business objectives, sees this as involving the treatment of employees as valued assets, a source of competitive advantage through their commitment and adaptability

inquiry, the first author observed two dimensions of bullying emerging from participant narratives, namely, depersonalized bullying via the presence of an oppressive work regime (Study B) and interpersonal bullying via victimization of individual agents by superiors (Study C). Further research was conducted to uncover both these observations. While the present paper discusses participants' experiences of interpersonal bullying (Study C), readers may refer to D'Cruz and Noronha (2008, 2009a) for participants' experiences of depersonalized bullying and an oppressive work regime (Study B).

Work context

As mentioned earlier, both the authors were engaged in a phenomenological inquiry of employee experiences of work in international facing call centers in Mumbai and Bangalore, India (Study A).   Rooted in van Manen's (1998) hermeneutic phenomenology, this study relied on conversational interviews with participants. Given the unwillingness of Indian ITES-BPO organizations to provide us with access to their employees, we resorted to snowball sampling initiated through our personal contacts and social networks. Ethical practices such as informed consent, voluntary participation and confidentiality were observed. Fifty-nine international facing call center agents (25 from Bangalore and 34 from Mumbai, 30 men and 29 women) participated in the study. Data, collected in English and recorded on audio cassettes and transcribed verbatim, were subject to sententious and selective thematic analyses (van Manen), and the core theme of "being professional" was identified. Study A provided us with insights into agents' work context, underscoring socioideological control, hard and soft HRM and inclusivist and exclusivist HR strategies. As previously indicated, Study C emerged from Study A (with participants of Study C being included in Study A) and hence both share similar work contexts. This section elaborates on agents' work context in India's international facing call centers derived essentially from agents' narratives in Study A but drawing on relevant literature as required.

International facing call centers in India, housed in MNC (multinational corporation) captive, MNC third party or Indian third party organizations, are an important constituent of the country's ITES-BPO sector, facilitating global offshoring such that overseas clients located in the USA (United States of America/US), the UK (United Kingdom), Canada and Australia provide services to their customers (also located overseas) via Indian/India-based service providers (henceforth also referred to as employer organizations in this paper; see footnote[2] for a description of India's ITES-BPO

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of skills and performance. Employees are proactive and resourceful rather than passive inputs into the productive process. Rather than exploitation and cost minimization, the watchwords in this model are investment and value-added (Legge, 2006).

Inclusivist HR strategies involve the use of employee involvement schemes and human resource initiatives that emphasize employee identification with, loyalty towards and complete reliance on the employer. Exclusivist strategies include transactional psychological contracts that privilege dismissal, closure, retrenchment, layoffs, casualization and outsourcing as well as the outright refusal to recognize and negotiate with unions (Peetz, 2002).

[2]   India's ITES-BPO (information technology enabled services-business process outsourcing) sector encompasses the offshoring and outsourcing of such processes that can be enabled with information technology (NASSCOM/National Association of Software and Service Companies, 2003) including in its ambit both call centers and back office services. While the Philippines, South Africa, Latin American and Eastern Europe states are emerging locations, India remains the pre-eminent location for offshored business

sector). Clients and service providers enter into formalized temporal or process based contracts (known as service level agreements/SLAs) that lay down clients' process and outcome requirements of the particular services. The fulfillment of the SLAs is critical to the continuity and/or renewal of the contractual relationship between the two parties. Employer organizations implement the SLAs, creating the work environment for participants. Thus, participants were engaged in jobs that entailed little complexity, variety and autonomy but that emphasized the completion of high volumes and the provision of good quality service in keeping with Batt and Moynihan's (2002) and Frenkel, Korczynski, Shire, and Tam's (1998) mass customized model. Participants worked in teams, headed by a team leader (TL). Performance, which was linked to the award of incentives over and above salary and to promotion opportunities, was evaluated at individual and team levels. Failure to meet the aforementioned expectations resulted in punishments, ranging from warnings, retraining and suspension to termination and dismissal. With termination and dismissal being used even in cases of confirmed employees, the primacy of transactional psychological contracts was evident.

Participants described their work environment as an oppressive work regime indicating depersonalized bullying (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2008, 2009a), invoking the hard model of HRM (Storey, 1993). At the same time, their narratives emphasized employer concern for employee well-being indicating that the oppressive work regime of the hard HRM model was couched in soft terms (Storey, 1993). Towards this end, employer organizations embraced the notion of professionalism. That is, employer organizations defined themselves in professional terms citing various organizational processes as proof of this. Among those that directly affected participants were employee redressal opportunities. Employer organizations prided themselves on the number and nature of grievance avenues they provided their agents with. In keeping with a professional style of management, openness of communication in terms of content, form, style and route were valued. Therefore, in addition to periodic employee satisfaction surveys, skip-level

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activities, accounting for 46% of all global offshoring (NASSCOM-McKinsey, 2005) and offering "an unbeatable mix of low costs, deep technical and language skills, mature vendors and supportive government policies" (Walker & Gott in NASSCOM, 2007, p. 29). While the key catalyst for this has been globalization, aided by India's liberalization and various central and state government initiatives (NASSCOM, 2006), India provides significant labor cost arbitrage. The large English-speaking and technical talent pool available in India is a critical component of this process (NASSCOM, 2006). Direct employment in India's ITES-BPO sector is calculated at 553,000 in the financial year 2006-2007 (NASSCOM, 2007), the sector having become an important avenue for employment especially for the country's youth. The ITES-BPO sector in India comes under the purview of the labor laws though the popular view held in Indian society (and maintained and promoted by ITES-BPO employer organizations, aided by government apathy) is that this is not so (See Noronha & D'Cruz, 2009). While call centers account for about 60-65% and back offices for about 35-40% of the services provided (Taylor & Bain, 2006), the key service categories, namely finance and accounting, customer interaction and human resource administration, account for 89% of industry revenues. Services are housed in MNC (multinational corporation) captive, MNC third party, Indian third party (all of which are international facing, i.e., serving overseas clients and customers) and domestic service provider organizations (NASSCOM, 2005), located principally in Tier 1 but now expanding to Tier 2 and 3 cities (NASSCOM, 2005 & 2006). Though there has been considerable diversification in the range of processes delivered from India and there certainly has been growth in higher-value and professional knowledge process outsourcing (KPO), the evidence strongly suggests that, in overall terms, the ITES-BPO industry in India still tends to provide largely standardized and routinized services of low complexity, emphasizing mass production and customer service (Taylor & Bain), in keeping with the mass customized model (Batt & Moynihan, 2002; Frenkel et al., 1998).

meetings and open fora with superiors, employees with grievances could approach anyone in the organization whether the CEO (chief executive officer), the TL or someone in between via email, letters, telephone conversations or face-to-face meetings. That the professional atmosphere in the organization precluded the complainant's victimization was strongly emphasized. Under such circumstances, not only did agents feel valued and empowered, considering employers in a positive light, but also any third party intervention including legal protection and collectivist groups were seen as redundant.

Participant narratives further highlighted how the interplay between the hard and soft models was managed via the employee identification process. Employer organizations cultivated the notion of professionalism in employees to gain their compliance and commitment to the realization of the organization's agenda as determined by SLAs. The notion of professionalism embraced agents' identity, altering their self-concept and enhancing their self-esteem. According to agents, professionals possess superior cognitive abilities, advanced qualifications and a sense of responsibility and commitment to work. They prioritize work over personal needs and pleasure, complying with job and organizational requirements and performing optimally and rationally while on the job. Under such circumstances, not only do agents perceive job-related gains such as remuneration, designation, material artifacts, etc., accruing from their job as consistent with the notion of professionalism but also transactional psychological contracts of employment as means of discipline are similarly justified.

Agents' professional identity precludes engagement with collectivization attempts (that is, labor unions that represent and protect employee interests) which are seen both as inconsistent with the essential features of professionalism and as redundant in instances where employers protect employee interests. Agents' position suits their employers who, realizing that unions would hamper the growth of the Indian ITES-BPO sector, not only refused to recognize collectivist groups but also threatened agents with dismissal and termination should they associate with them. It is no surprise, then, that participants were unaware of the existence of any unions in India's ITES-BPO sector.

Developing employee loyalty to and identification with the employer organization, making employees completely dependent on the employer organization for the protection of their interests, refusal to recognize trade unions and collectivist endeavors and privileging transactional psychological contracts of employment illustrate the engagement of Peetz's (2002) inclusivist and exclusivist HR strategies in employer organizations. These strategies facilitate the organizational control process aimed at circumscribing employee divergent interests and idiosyncratic behaviors and ensuring employee conformity such that employee self-interests and disruptions are minimized and organizational goals are served (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006). In this manner, employer organizations are able to maintain a conducive intra-organizational and extra-organizational environment that allows business to flourish (Noronha & D'Cruz, 2009). Yet, pursuing the utilitarian instrumentalism of the hard HRM model while professing commitment to the developmental humanism of the soft HRM model reveals the presence of rhetoric which was further confirmed by call center managers (Noronha & D'Cruz, 2009). Indeed, the rhetoric adopted by employers frequently embraces the tenets of the soft commitment model, while the reality as experienced by employees is more concerned with strategic control, similar to the hard model.

It is relevant to mention that the presence of rhetoric was confirmed by call center managers who highlighted the discrepancy between the conceptualization of professionalism as communicated to employees and the enactment of professionalism within the employer organization. Managers confirmed that professionalism is invoked as a means of identity regulation within the framework of employee control via inclusivist and exclusivist HR strategies to achieve the organizational agenda (Noronha & D'Cruz, 2009).

Methodology

As described above, in the course of a phenomenological study seeking to understand the subjective work experiences of international facing call center agents in Mumbai and Bangalore, India, where the core theme of being professional (Study A) and major theme of an oppressive work regime (Study B) were identified, instances of interpersonal bullying were also observed. Further research was conducted to understand the experiences of this latter group (Study C) and is presented in this paper.

Design

In keeping with the research strategy of Study A from which it was derived, Study C (henceforth also referred to as the/this study/inquiry/research) adopted a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology derives from the Greek word "phenomenon" which means to show itself, to put into light or to manifest something that can become visible in itself (Heidegger as cited in Ray, 1994) According to Bishop and Scudder (1991), "phenomenology attempts to disclose the essential meaning of human endeavors" (p. 5).

More specifically, the study aimed at grasping the essence of participants' experiences of interpersonal bullying as they were lived. This reflected van Manen's (1998) hermeneutic phenomenology which studies the world as it is experienced pre-reflectively rather than as it is conceptualized, focusing on the structure of meaning of the experience for the individual, and hence this approach was adopted. van Manen portrays the methodical structure of phenomenology as a dynamic interplay between six research activities. According to him, the researcher turns to a phenomenon which seriously interests him/her and commits him/her to this abiding concern. The single mindedness of purpose results in full thinking and deep questioning, so that we can understand life wholly. The experience is investigated as it is lived rather than as it is conceptualized. In other words, the attempt is to renew contact with the original experience and to become full of it. The researcher then reflects on the essential themes that characterize the phenomenon. A true reflection on lived experience is a thoughtful, reflective grasping of what it is that renders this experience special. The fourth activity is describing the experience and its essence through the art of writing and rewriting. Language and thought need to be applied to lived experience such that a precise depiction is made. In order to achieve all of this, the researcher needs to maintain a strong orientation to the fundamental question so as to maintain direction and to come out with valid findings. He/she also needs to balance the research context by considering parts and wholes, that

is, one needs to constantly measure the overall design of the study against the significance that the parts must play in the total structure.

In keeping with van Manen (1998), the conversational interview was used to explore and gather experiential narrative material that would serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding of the experience being studied. Though unstructured, the process was disciplined by focusing on the fundamental question that prompted the research. The interview thus centered around participants' experiences of being bullied including the manifestation, frequency, duration, severity and course of bullying, the identification of the perpetrator, the possible reasons being bullied, their reactions to being bullied, their attempts at coping, the role of their employer organization and the contribution of their support systems. The clarity of the research question did not preclude exploring issues that emerged during the interview, since the researcher was aware that they could generate important insights into the phenomenon under study.

Selection of participants and data collection

As pointed out before, participants included in Study C were those participants in Study A whose experiences of work indicated interpersonal bullying and victimization. Not only was the first author able to discern this from their narratives but participants themselves referred to their experiences as victimization and/or harassment. Probing further to understand their predicament better, the first author was able to establish that they were indeed targets of interpersonal bullying by examining descriptions of their experiences in the light of Einarsen et al.'s (2003) definition of the phenomenon. Ten participants from Study A were thus identified as targets of interpersonal bullying. In order to explore their experiences further, the authors requested them to participate in Study C. Informed consent, voluntary participation and confidentiality were emphasized. All ten participants agreed to participate. A convenient time and place for the interview were set up. Permission to record the interviews on audio-cassette was sought, and since it was explained to participants that recording the interview helped to maintain the accuracy of their accounts as compared to compiling field notes where accuracy could be compromised due to faulty recall later, they agreed. The presence of the tape recorder did not appear to hinder participants' responses. During the interview, observations about the participants were made and written up after the session ended. All interviews were conducted in English and were later transcribed verbatim by the research staff.

Of the ten participants (six women and four men) included in the study, six were located in Mumbai and four were based in Bangalore. Participants' ages ranged between 21 to 25 years, with two being undergraduates and the rest having completed their graduation. Nine participants were unmarried and one was married. All participants worked at agent level in different international facing call centers (five worked in inbound processes and five in outbound processes; five worked in US processes, four in UK processes and one in an Australian process). It is relevant to mention that for all participants, this was their first job in the ITES-BPO sector. All participants described themselves as career-oriented. In keeping with this, participants worked hard and emerged as the best performers in their teams and among the best in the process. All participants were being bullied by their superiors, namely, team leaders, process

managers and operations managers. None of the participants were members of unions (See Table 1).

Table 1.

Participants' Socio-demographic Details

Participant	1	2	3	4	5
Gender	Woman	Woman	Woman	Woman	Woman
Age (years)	21	22	25	23	21
Marital status	Single	Single	Married	Single	Single
Education	Undergraduate	BA	BCom	BA	BSc
Location	Mumbai	Mumbai	Mumbai	Mumbai	Bangalore
Process details	Inbound/USA	Inbound/UK	Inbound/USA	Outbound/UK	Inbound/USA
Source of bullying/bully	Team leader (TL)/Process manager (PM)/Operations manager (OM)	TL	TL/OM	TL	TL/PM
New employment details	Inbound/USA	Inbound/UK (as TL)	Inbound/UK	Inbound/UK	Inbound/USA

Participant	6	7	8	9	10
Gender	Woman	Man	Man	Man	Man
Age (years)	24	22	23	22	24
Marital status	Single	Single	Single	Single	Single
Education	BA	Undergraduate	BCom	BSc	BA
Location	Bangalore	Bangalore	Bangalore	Mumbai	Mumbai
Process details	Outbound/USA	Outbound/UK	Outbound/USA	Inbound/Australia	Outbound/UK
Source of bullying/bully	TL/PM	TL/PM/OM	TL/PM/OM	TL/OM	TL
New employment details	Inbound/Australia	Inbound/UK	Inbound/USA	Inbound/Australia (as TL)	Outbound/UK

Data analysis

The treatment and analysis of data followed van Manen (1998). That is, thematic analysis was employed to grasp and make explicit the structure of meaning of the lived experience. Themes were isolated using the sententious (where we attend to the text as a whole and capture its fundamental meaning) and selective (where we repeatedly read/listen to the text and examine the meaning of statements which are particularly revealing) approaches.

In following the sententious approach (van Manen, 1998), each transcript was read as a whole to capture the core/essential meaning of participants' experiences. That is, through a careful reading of the transcript, the fundamental meaning of the experience for the participant as emerging from the text as a whole was identified. Two common themes could be observed across all participants. "Clarifying my world" pertained to

long-term existentialist questions centring around identity work (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2009b) while "protecting my interests" encompassed short-term practical considerations regarding coping with the situation.

A selective thematic analyses (van Manen, 1998) was undertaken through which categories/patterns/themes that contributed to the core theme were identified. That is, each transcript was read repeatedly and significant statements relating to and illustrating the various dimensions of the essential theme, were identified and demarcated. Labels were assigned to these categories/patterns/themes and later standardized across transcripts. Within each transcript, categories/patterns/themes were examined for their interlinkages. A comparison across transcripts was undertaken to highlight congruence in the patterns/categories/themes and their linkages across participants. Next, across transcripts, those categories/patterns/themes that dovetailed together in meaningful yet distinct ways were developed into major themes. Finally, the core theme and its constituent themes were joined into a text that captured participants' lived experience in its completeness.

The present paper puts forth the core theme of "protecting my interests" which captures participants' coping with the situation. Major themes here displayed temporality and the critical role of HRM and were organized to reflect these two dimensions with categories, patterns and themes being interwoven to bring out the whole picture emphasizing complexity, causality and context. Experiencing confusion, engaging organizational options, moving inwards and exiting the organization were the major themes. The findings section elucidates the core theme and its constituent major themes.

Methodological rigor

Methodological rigor in the study was maintained through prolonged engagement (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), investigators triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1999) and consensual validation (Lincoln & Guba, 1999). Prolonged engagement led the researchers to spend a lot of time in the field to understand its subtleties and nuances. In relation to the use of interviews, particular importance was given to rapport building with the participants – it was opined that making the participants feel comfortable and establishing their trust would play a critical role in helping them to share their stories. During the course of the interviews, the researchers used probes and cross-checks to further their understanding of participants' narratives. Investigators triangulation ensured that each researcher kept the other one "honest" (Lincoln & Guba, 1999, p. 412), adding to the credibility of the findings. Immersion in the data during the process of analysis helped the researchers gain insight into participant experiences and perspectives and ensure the rigor of the findings.

van Manen (1998) proposes formal or informal hermeneutic conversations with other researchers on core themes and themes in order to generate deeper insights. Themes are examined, articulated, reinterpreted, added, omitted and reformulated. The attempt is to derive a common orientation to the experience and to help the researcher see limits in his/her present vision and to transcend them. A collaborative rather than competitive stance is indispensable here. Realizing the significance of this process for incorporating methodological rigor in the research, the researcher followed it in all the data analysis phases. Core themes, major themes, themes, emerging conceptual categories and patterns

were discussed and critiqued with research colleagues and experts in qualitative research. Based on the emerging discourse, reformulations were made till a consensual validation was achieved.

Findings

The core theme of "protecting my interests" captures participants' attempts to deal with the experience of bullying, relying on their personal and social resources as well as on organizational options in order to ensure that their emotional well-being, task-related performance and contributions at work and long-term career goals were not adversely and excessively hampered on account of victimization. Participants' endeavors displayed two prominent features: the presence of turning points, indicative of stages, in spite of the complexity of the experience and the critical role of HRM in influencing multiple facets of the experience. Major themes were organized around these defining characteristics while simultaneously portraying participant experiences in their entirety. The four major themes include experiencing confusion, engaging organizational options, moving inwards and exiting the organization and are presented below. Vignettes of participants' experiences in their own words are included in the presentation.

Experiencing confusion

Participants maintained that it was only in retrospect that they were able to identify when the experience of bullying began. During the initial onset period, they did not realize that they were being bullied. Being immersed in their work, they did not pick up the signs of their victimization. Oblivious of the situation, they continued to work as they always had. The persistence of the bully's behavior is what caused them to notice it. When they did become aware of the change in the bully's behavior towards them, they attributed it to the oppressive work environment. Since the work environment was very demanding, participants believed that this experience emerged as a result of the pressures to perform and deliver and hence was common to all participants. They responded to it professionally, in keeping with their internalized professional identity, and stepped up their performance in order to ensure individual, team, process and organizational success. In their view, the bully had no reason to bully them; given both that there was no conflict between them and that their performance was outstanding. Moreover, they did not believe that there was room for any irrational behavior in a professional environment. Participants therefore dismissed their initial observations and focused on work.

Yet, over time, the continuation of the bully's behavior made it hard for participants to completely ignore it. Participants' response at this time displayed a duality: on the one hand, they attempted to explain this to themselves, relying on the stringent work environment and their professional identity as well as on the hypothesis that perhaps some personal factors within the superior were responsible for his/her behavior; on the other hand, they could not deny that their superior(s) was behaving differently with them compared both to the earlier time period and to other colleagues and that the nature, frequency and intensity of this behavior, as well as in some instances, the number of bullies, was increasing. Ambivalence characterized participants' emotional

state, with feelings of reassurance and distress jostling with and alternating with each other.

As time passed, distress prevailed over reassurance and participants had to acknowledge that something appeared to be amiss. Their immediate reaction was to be vigilant in order to ascertain the situation accurately. As participants made their observations, they would share them with their friends at the workplace and with their support networks (both family and friends) outside the workplace. According to participants, the ensuing discussions helped them make sense of and cope with the experience. On the one hand, these discussions allowed clarity of perception to emerge, facilitating definition of the situation as one in which the participant was being bullied. On the other hand, support networks gave participants a sense of support and connectedness from which they drew strength to cope with the situation. Gaining certainty thus occurred, following prolonged and careful observation of and reflection over the bully's behavior. Participants reported being completely taken aback at this point in time. They could not comprehend why they should be victimized. Neither their performance nor the employer organization's espousal of professionalism was seen as consistent with this experience. They reported feelings of distress including sadness, anxiety and a sense of being let down. It was their intra-organizational and extra-organizational informal support networks that provided them with hope and confidence.

> I realized what was happening only much later. It was difficult to make out actually. Because the work is very demanding – one has to perform and the TL keeps yelling to make us agents work and reach targets. So initially, I felt that this is what is happening. But a couple of times, I found that he (the TL who was the bully) was saying a lot of nasty things about me – making fun of me, calling me names, ridiculing me with other agents. I just dismissed it – who has the time to bother about these things when there is so much work? But then it became more frequent – he would stand behind me and pass nasty comments. While I worked, he would spread stories about me to other agents in the team, he would publicly make fun of me. By then, I felt that something was wrong and I could not understand why. Here, I work so well, I meet my targets, everything. So why should this happen? Plus, I had never had any fight or disagreement with him. But it was happening. My friends at work also observed that he was singling me out. It disturbed me a lot when I finally realized what was happening. After all, it is a professional organization and I am so committed to my work, so how can this happen?

A range of bullying behaviors were described including isolation, personal attacks, verbal threats and task-related difficulties. Some participants highlighted how the TL, being unable to find fault with their work-related performance, would subject them to personal criticism and ridicule in front of the whole team or by spreading false rumors and allegations about them to various colleagues at the workplace. For a few participants, over time, exclusion from colleagues formed part of the process.

In some of these instances, the TL was able to successfully influence the process manager and operations manager who also actively participated in the bullying process.

Participants described the offensive remarks, humiliation and ridicule as well as accusations made by the latter set of superiors. They pointed out that these essentially centered around their personal lives, with only occasional and tangential references to work, since no fault as such could be found with their task performance.

Other participants mentioned that TLs and process managers changed their tasks to those for which they had no training and which they found to be beyond their capability. Not surprisingly, then, from being star performers, participants began to flounder. Their superiors used this as an opportunity to bully them. Negative comments about their abilities, taking the form of personal attacks, were made to them and to other team members. Participants reported being subject to insults, ridicule and allegations as well as being gossiped about and isolated.

> He (the TL who was the bully) would stand behind me and comment about my style of working like "vow, what a way she finishes off customers" – so much sarcasm in his voice. Then on the call floor or during team meetings, he would make remarks about me, my appearance. If I asked a question or a clarification, he would not answer but jeer at me and get other team members to join in. Any suggestion made by me was the subject of jokes and gossip. Then spreading false stories about me, even about my family – that we are untrustworthy, unprincipled. He would publicly tell new agents to stay away from me. If I made an error – and that was so rare – he would scream and taunt and bring it to everyone's notice "finally, ms. perfect has proved to be human." It was like being constantly attacked, humiliated, ridiculed. After a point, it became unbearable – I became a mental wreck.

Four participants and their support networks invoked the image of professionalism, and believing in this, they felt that the best way in which the situation should be handled was to talk directly to the bully. These participants harbored the view that the openness that was described as characterizing a professional organization would help them resolve the matter. In talking to the bullies, participants sought to clarify the situation by checking with their superiors whether there was anything amiss in their work or their behavior that was giving rise to the bully's behavior. While bringing up the topic with their superiors called for courage, the reactions of the superiors underscored the rhetoric of professionalism within the organization. Contrary to the claims of rationality, objectivity, absence of hierarchy and camaraderie, superiors considered participant behavior to be inappropriate and disrespectful of their authority and reacted with anger. Participants' emotional strain was exacerbated, comprising anxiety, depression, betrayal and distrust.

> Talking directly to him (the TL who was the bully) seemed a sensible thing to do. I felt it would clean the air. After all, I was a top performer so there was no problem on that front. Besides, there had never been any bad blood between us (the TL and me). I believed in the professionalism of the company and so I felt that approaching him directly would help – I could put forth my views and he could put forth his and the matter could be amicably sorted out. But it didn't work that way.

All participants continued to perform to the best of their abilities in spite of the difficult situation. Admittedly, this was a major challenge, given their distressing predicament and emotional state. Nonetheless, participants put their best foot forward, recognizing the importance of performance for the continuity of their tenure and for their career growth as well as in keeping with the notion of professionalism and the organizational commitment that was expected of them. What helped participants at this stage was their ability to look at the situation positively and to stay focused on their long-term plans as well as the support they received from their family and friends within and outside the organization.

Participants maintained that over time they concluded that the basic motive behind their superiors' bullying was a sense of threat and discomfort with their superior performance. That is, TLs felt insecure about their own positions and careers, believing that the participant would overtake him/her and hence resorted to bullying the participant directly in order to hamper his/her output and image at work as well as influencing other superiors such as the process manager and the operations manager in order to sabotage the participants' prospects.

Engaging organizational options

Following the identification of the problem and the unsuccessful attempt of four participants to resolve the situation directly with the bully (as described in the foregoing major theme), participants tried to come to terms with the situation in a variety of ways. Apart from trying to look at the situation in a positive and constructive manner as a learning opportunity and a test of strength and to control oneself from emotionally reacting to it, some participants turned to prayer and meditation. Sharing their experiences and related thoughts and feelings with friends and family was described as playing a significant role in helping all participants deal with their experiences as having someone to listen, comfort and offer advice was critical in providing them with an anchor. Pepping themselves up in this manner, participants maintained optimal performance at work.

Nonetheless, the thought that they should do something about the situation would not leave them. They harbored the idea that they should not be cowered down by the superior particularly when they had not done anything to warrant such victimization. It was important to be proactive in resolving the situation rather than being passive and accepting it indefinitely. They maintained a rationalist perspective that given their performance at work, there was no logical reason for their superiors to bully them. The feelings of unfairness and injustice that emerged as a result of this reasoning were accompanied by thoughts about how the situation could be handled. Participants pointed out how defining the situation in terms of unfairness and injustice led to them to realize that such descriptions were at odds with the employer organizations' espousal of professionalism, and that as per the latters' exhortations, there were always intra-organizational avenues to redress their grievances. Identifying organizational redressal mechanisms served as a point of comfort for participants as it gave them a ray of hope that their problem would be solved.

> When I have done nothing wrong, why should I put up with such a
> situation? It just made no sense to me. Yet, at first, I did not know what to

> do. Talking to him (the TL who was the bully) backfired – he grew furious and vicious. So what was the next option? Why should I take this lying down when I am a good employee, when I do not deserve it? Then it struck me to go to HR – after all, they are the ones who are supposed to look after employees.

Given the manner in which employee organizations had portrayed the robustness of the grievance systems and the emphasis on employee well-being, participants harbored no doubt that their interests would be protected and hence approached the HR department (footnote[3]).

While all participants initiated the redressal process via a face-to-face meeting with a junior HR manager, the subsequent procedures varied across participants. In three cases, the HR manager requested the participants to send a written communication about their experiences to him/her, and two sent emails while one sent a letter. In seven cases, the HR manager approached by the participants indicated that he/she would consult senior HR managers to ascertain procedure, and following that, they put the participants in direct contact with the senior HR manager. Participants shared their experiences with the senior HR manager, requesting HR intervention to resolve the problem. In four instances, participants were instructed to send their grievance in writing and they complied with three sending emails and one sending a letter. In three instances, the communication remained at a verbal level.

In all instances, the HR personnel reassured the participant that their problems would be sorted out. Being reassured in this manner, participants experienced a sense of relief and renewed faith in the organization. This helped them to maintain their superior performance in spite of the ongoing challenges.

> During the initial contact with HR, they were very reassuring and told me not to worry. This put me at ease and I was able to concentrate on work. At that point of time, I felt that the company was just awesome – they really cared for us.

Following their initial interaction with the HR department, participants waited for about one month to hear from them. Participants maintained that such a time lag was appropriate for two reasons: HR department was any way busy with various organizational matters, and their problem, being a complicated one, required time to be sorted out. During this time, while bullying continued, participants maintained a positive outlook and kept up with their work, believing that the situation would soon change.

A month after approaching HR when no response was forthcoming and the bullying was continuing, participants once again contacted HR personnel to ascertain the status of their grievance. They received reassurances from the particular HR manager

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[3]   While participants in this study approached the HR department for redressal, it is important to note that HRM/inclusivist and exclusivist HR strategies referred to in the paper were pervasive across the organization, being espoused and enacted not just by the HR department but by the entire firm (See Noronha & D'Cruz, 2009).

they had had detailed discussions (senior in seven instances and junior in three instances) that the matter was being looked into and would definitely be sorted out, but that given the sensitive nature of the issue, it would take time to be resolved.

Participants pointed out that, once again, they experienced a sense of reassurance and hope though they had to train themselves to be patient and wait for the situation to be ameliorated. Motivation to perform remained unaltered and participants continued to put their best foot forward in task-related matters.

> After filing my complaint, I didn't hear back from HR for a month. Of course, one has to give them some time. But a month seemed long enough. So I met them again and they told me they were on the job. They were quite convincing that the matter would be sorted out. I could not wait for the situation to improve but I believed that HR was truly employee-centered.

After about one more month had passed and there was neither any response from HR nor any reduction in the experience of bullying, participants experienced restlessness. They wondered why the situation was unchanged and why HR had not got in touch with them. They were unsure whether anything had been done by HR about the situation. While some participants reported a sense of disquiet, others described feelings of anger stemming from a sense of unfairness and injustice.

Approaching HR once again appeared to be the action of choice for all participants. The seven participants who were in touch with a senior HR manager reverted back to him/her. The three participants whose contact heretofore was with a junior HR manager decided to take up their grievance with a senior HR manager, and following a meeting with this person, forwarded their earlier written communication about their grievance to him/her.

While participants once again received verbal reassurances from the HR department that the matter would be looked into, they decided either almost simultaneously or within a few days of meeting HR that they should follow-up on the matter within a short span of time if they did not hear back from HR rather than waiting for an entire month to elapse as they had been doing in the past.

Participants recounted being hopeful after their meeting with HR but with the knowledge that they needed to be proactive as well. Consequently, participants followed up with HR within seven to ten days of their last contact with them, and this pattern continued until the next phase. That is, participants would get in touch with HR periodically in order to get their grievance effectively redressed, until they realized that the endeavor was futile. Participants underscored that it was always up to them to follow-up with HR and that the latter never took the initiative. Further, the responses from HR were only verbal.

> Two months down the line, HR was dragging its feet. I mean, they never responded – it was always up to me to follow-up. Then they would mouth so many reassuring things but nothing would happen. It was getting a bit disconcerting and I was growing impatient. The bottomline was that I had to actively follow-up.

Participants' periodic but regular follow-ups unleashed a complex spiral of events that made their predicament more difficult than ever. Participants pointed out that while HR never attempted to contact them to apprise them of the situation, the frequency of their follow-ups varied from every two to every ten days. While the senior HR manager would meet them sometimes, after making them wait for a considerable length of time in spite of a prior appointment, it was not uncommon either for him/her to refuse to meet them at the last minute in spite of the prior appointment and the long wait, sometimes redirecting them to junior HR managers or for him/her to refuse to grant them an appointment, advising them to meet junior HR managers.

When senior managers did meet them, they expressed disbelief at participants' experiences and blamed participants for the situation, insinuating either that the participant had done something wrong to invite such behavior from his/her superior(s) and/or that the participant was unable to cope and adjust. Participants were admonished to be "sports" and not complain and to think in terms of their long-term career prospects and interests. Senior HR managers would also point out to participants that their assessment of their situation was wrong given the professional orientation of the organization and the thrust on employee well-being. Participants' professionalism and commitment to their work and to the employer organization were also questioned. It was not uncommon for senior HR managers to call their colleagues in HR to sit in on these meetings and to garner their support overtly and/or covertly.

Meetings with junior HR managers, held at the behest of the senior HR manager, proceeded on the same lines as those conducted by the latter, where participants were questioned, admonished, held responsible and doubted.

> It was all about waiting, dodging and taunting. Whether you had an appointment or not, you had to wait. Waiting could end any how – no meeting, postponement, meeting a junior. If you were lucky to meet, you would get a verbal bashing – it was all your fault, you had to adjust, it was in your interests to cope with the situation. You won't believe but they would even question your integrity, your professionalism – imagine, with my performance levels, they were doing that! It was so humiliating – no worse, it was shocking. Because, here, you are already aggrieved and then they are blaming you more. You go there with all the hope that your problem will be solved – the company has told you that hundreds of times - but it's just an illusion.

Participants recounted that during the initial set of meetings with HR, they would attempt to counter the arguments put forth by citing their outstanding performance and by providing details of the bullying experience in the hope that HR managers would see their point of view. Participants adopted this approach even though they were distressed and uncomfortable with the behavior of the HR managers. However, with HR managers maintaining their position, participants began to feel cornered, alone and defenseless over time. Nonetheless, they mustered courage and used the meeting as an opportunity to ask that their grievance be redressed, referring to the employer organizations' professional orientation to support their request.

In the case of a few participants, during a couple of meetings with the senior HR manager, the bullies were also called in. After briefing them about the participants' grievance, the senior manager would proceed to disbelieve, blame, advise and question the participant as was his/her practice during such meetings. Tacit as well as obvious support between the HR manager and the bully could be discerned by the participant. Participants reported that their immediate reaction when the HR manager first invited the bully for the meeting was one of hope mingled with fear: hope because they felt that the matter would be resolved and fear because they felt that the bully would harm them even more. However, as the meeting got underway, they realized that they were being cornered. Participants described how they felt extremely distressed at this development but faced the situation as bravely as they could, maintaining their stand and seeking redressal whenever they were given an opportunity to speak up.

> I was sitting with these two HR managers and he (the TL who was the bully) walks in. My heart froze. But in a second, I realized that these guys (the HR managers) had called him. Well, they were all on one side – that was clear. So the HR people kept on berating me and the TL was being shielded. I was at a complete loss…I mean what am I supposed to do? I just kept sitting and listening, trying to be brave.

Participants pointed out that after four to six weeks of their repeated interactions with HR as described above, they felt that they were going around in circles. The HR department's response, instead of resolving the problem, scapegoated them, adding to the experience of bullying. In participants' view, HR was reneging on its professional mandate of protecting employee interests as well as on the employer organization's stated commitment to professionalism and employee well-being. Participants reported being doubly victimized and having to cope with a very difficult situation. Describing their position as that of having been cornered, participants spoke of severe emotional distress. Anxiety, depression and meaninglessness prevailed with adverse effects on participants' physical health. Ailments such as digestion-related problems, influenza and related symptoms and insomnia were commonly reported. Task-related motivation waned, resulting in poor job performance. A growing distrust towards the employer organization emerged. At the same time, participants recognized that the absence of extra-organizational third party intervention such as legal mechanisms or employee unions/associations, as per their knowledge, left them completely alone in their quest for justice. Helplessness was pervasive.

> After a point, I realized that there was nothing to it. HR was not going to help me. On the contrary, they were helping him (the bully). Professionalism, employee well-being – these are all hollow words. These words mean nothing, just ways of getting us agents to work. I felt so let down, betrayed – but what could I do? There were no alternatives. I used to be so depressed, so sad – I did not know what to believe in any more.

Participants were also able to discern an increase in their superior's bullying behavior around the time when they actively followed up with the HR department. Reflecting on

this, participants were of the opinion that during the initial two months following their complaint, HR "sat on it" for various reasons including disinterest and failure to take the situation seriously, desire not to ruffle supervisory and managerial counterparts, belief that the situation would ameliorate itself and lack of concern for employees, and hence there was no change in the bullying during this period. However, once participants actively pursued the matter with HR, bullying worsened. Not only did bullying increase in frequency and intensity but was accompanied by taunts about the participant having approached HR and about the futility and foolhardiness of such a move in the light of managerial unity. Bullies would make public references to the situation such that the matter became known to participants' colleagues on the call floor. Participants believed that their frequent follow-up with HR resulted in the bully getting to know of the complaint either because the matter was discussed at various fora resulting in rumors floating on the grapevine or because HR informed the bully either formally or informally.

Participants pointed out that while they strove hard to maintain a positive attitude and a calm frame of mind in the second half of this phase, the role of their social network was critical in helping them cope during this time. While the intra-organizational informal support network did not overtly intervene in the situation, they provided covert support, mainly in the form of advice, listening, empathy and other such forms of emotional and informational assistance. Participants did not harbor any resentment towards these people for their lack of overt support. Instead, they appreciated their covert support, acknowledging that their intra-organizational support system could not raise a voice against the ongoing victimization or openly support them for fear of losing their own positions and/or of being victimized. Similarly, participants' extra-organizational social network served as a source of strength, comfort and guidance. Participants highlighted that the contribution of their social support system assumed even greater significance towards the end of this phase when they began to feel hopeless and were unable to stay positive and calm. In their view, it was primarily the support of their social networks that helped them tide over this difficult part of the phase.

Moving inwards

Participants' experiences towards the later part of the previous phase resulted in severe emotional strain. Depression, anxiety, hopelessness and helplessness prevailed. Participants reported being engulfed by their distress such that they withdrew into themselves, feeling dissociated from their surroundings. It was a period of meaninglessness, confusion and uncertainty and participants were unable to relate to the world around them. It was as if the world as they knew it no longer existed and they were grappling to make sense of the new order of things. That is, they were attempting to create meaning out of their experiences in a bid to regain the essential structure of their lives that their experiences had destroyed. Not only did this sensemaking process result in them spending more time with themselves introspecting but also the emotional situation they were going through did not create in them the desire to interact with any one. Participants described themselves as unsociable during this time. Participants' affective state had adverse effects on their work-related motivation and performance. Participants experienced alienation from and disinterest in their work and their performance suffered.

Ill-health with ailments including gastrointestinal problems, influenza and related symptoms and sleep disruption plagued some participants.

Participants pointed out that in spite of their withdrawn and introspective demeanour, their social networks rallied around them. Though they did not engage with their social networks nor seek out connectedness, participants reported that the support spontaneously and voluntarily offered by their families and friends was crucial in helping them cope with their difficult circumstances. Not only did this support make them feel loved and valued, giving them some sense of self-worth and providing some meaningfulness and positivity in their lives, but it also served as a link of continuity and stability during a period of chaos and turbulence when new meanings of life had to be found. The presence of support reassured participants that there was someone they could fall back on when everything else in their lives seemed to be falling apart. But, at the same time, recreating meaning was essentially a solitary activity.

> I survived only because of my family and friends. Because, by then, nothing was left. The harassment had worsened, I was completely isolated, HR was victimizing me, he (the bully) was being protected…I was completely shattered by the experience. I mean what are you supposed to think? First, I am being victimized for no reason. Then, HR backtracks. I felt that there was nothing left in life – I was totally lost. So if I came through, it was only because of my family and my friends…they helped me believe that there was something more to life than such a ghastly experience.

Participants' attempts to work through their difficult circumstances and the influence of their social networks made them realize over time that they could look elsewhere for a job. Participants described how this came about. While initially they were overwhelmed by their emotional distress, as they grappled with the experiences in their minds, they realized that there were alternative ways in which the situation could be reviewed. In their words, "it was not the end of the world", "there was more to life than this", "there were other options", "one does not have to put up with such experiences", and "one's life should be in one's hands". Similar sentiments were being echoed by their support networks as well. Participants indicated that as a result of these thoughts, they began to look at the options available to them and realized that moving to another organization was the best alternative. Participants recognized that the fact that the job market in the ITES-BPO sector was booming, providing them with a flood of alternatives without compromising their financial position and career interests, played a critical role in influencing their thoughts and their decision. In their view, it was wiser to move out of a hostile and unjust situation rather than fight a losing and lonely battle.

Participants' decision to move was completely supported by their support networks. Having chosen this path, participants reported the emergence of a positive outlook. They felt more hopeful about themselves and their future in addition to feeling that they had greater control over their lives. Improvements in morale and in health were described.

> I used to ponder over the situation in my mind – why did it happen to me? What went wrong? How should I go forward? And then one day, I realized that this sector is booming, so why not just move to another job? Because I could not continue working there. And it was a practical decision. I would not lose out career-wise or in terms of money. Plus, I would feel much better in a good environment.

Participants specified that during this phase, bullying from the superiors continued without abating. Also, while they did not approach HR at all during this phase, HR did not approach them either in response to their complaint. In fact, there was no interaction between them and HR, and if at all they came across any HR manager at the workplace, the latter regarded them with coldness and distance. But they got a sense from the office grapevine and from their intra-organization support group that the bullies and the HR managers were "spoiling their name". In other words, the bullies and the HR managers created a situation whereby the participant was known as a trouble maker, a maladjusted individual, a difficult person, a misfit and a burden to the organization. As a result, coworkers did not wish to associate with the participant for fear of being victimized. Consequently, participants felt extremely isolated at work. According to participants, all these experiences at the workplace disturbed them but the hope that came with their decision to quit their current jobs and seek employment elsewhere played a crucial role in helping them cope with the situation. In their view, knowing that the present predicament would continue only for a short period of time and would be replaced by a fresh and positive start made it easier to bear.

> Things remained bad right till the end. In fact, you could say that they worsened. HR and he (the bully) gave me a bad name and none of my team mates would mix with me. So when I decided to leave, I felt such relief. Because I would soon be rid of such a terrible situation. It gave me hope.

Participants also pointed out that once they were certain about their decision to quit the current organization, the hope that they felt enhanced their motivation with related impact on their performance. Participants pointed out that while their earlier levels of motivation and commitment had not returned, they were at a higher level than what was present during the end of Phase 2 and beginning of Phase 3. So while they did not have their heart and soul in their work as had been the case previously, their involvement and output were better than they had been during the period when they felt alienated and dissociated from work. While participants attributed this essentially to their improved morale, they also pointed out that as outstanding performers dedicated to their work and their careers, they believed in doing their best. Thus, in spite of the continuing victimization, participants once again began to perform well.

Exiting the organization

Changing jobs at the agent level of the organizational hierarchy within India's ITES-BPO sector was described by participants as tricky. While there is a large demand for agents, there is also a huge supply of candidates, and hence while ITES-BPO

organizations are not willing to wait for a candidate to join, candidates who are already employed within the sector know that they have to be quick in making the transition from one job to another and that current employers sabotage this transition by holding back experience certificates and relieving letters in order not to lose trained and talented workforce. Under these circumstances, such candidates stand to lose the most unless they can manage the situation effectively and/or are willing to compromise. In the absence of experience certificates and relieving letters, candidates wishing to make a transition from their present employment to a new position rely on their salary slips and display of skills to impress prospective employers who may/may not be convinced. If the latter are convinced, they would consider the candidate for a position higher than that of an entry level agent, facilitating his/her career growth. Even if they are not, they would offer the candidate an entry level agent position at a salary higher than his/her current salary in order to successfully hire him/her.

     Once candidates have found new positions, they have only a few days in which to move from the old job to the new one. Following the prescribed procedure of serving a notice period of one month does not work for several reasons: (a) they would lose the offer as the new employer is not willing to wait that long, and (b) the current employer would not relieve them, withholding both their salary and their experience and leaving certificates. Candidates thus attempt to shift jobs around the end of the month without serving a notice period – in this manner, they receive their salary for the month from the old organization and join the new position the following month while providing a verbal notice to the TL/to a colleague of the old organization on their last day and foregoing the experience and relieving certificates which they would have never received any way. This entire process takes between three to seven days and new employers are willing to wait for this length of time for candidates to join, though they always prefer as short a time period as possible.

     In spite of the challenges involved and the compromises made especially by agents who take up new jobs at the same level as earlier, agents make transitions for various reasons including victimization, inability to grow, boredom and monotony as well as health issues. Participants in our study were no different.

     All our participants were well aware of the dynamics associated with changing jobs in the ITES-BPO sector. They also knew that moving to another job was the best option for them, given their experience of victimization. Yet, victimization was the very reason why they could not follow prescribed procedures but would have to leave without a notice or relieving letter.

     When participants decided to quit their current organization and seek employment elsewhere, their decision was a well considered one, not made in haste or desperation. Accordingly, their search was not random but proceeded according to their specific preferences. While all of them remained within the ambit of international facing call centers, they attempted to choose processes and shifts in keeping with their preferences. Three participants had no problems in continuing with processes and shifts similar to those they were currently in but the rest wished to move either from outbound to inbound processes and/or from US to UK/Australian processes so that shift timings did not include late night "graveyard" shifts. This latter group felt that such a move would reduce the physical and emotional strain they experienced and provide them with greater opportunity to pursue further education and develop their careers. Four from this group

were successful here. While all the participants wished to pursue a vertical move in their job switch, this was possible only for two of them whose experience and performance were taken into account and team leader positions were offered to them. The remaining eight participants whose new jobs were at entry level agent positions started at higher salaries – this group were happy to find jobs with reputed firms at higher returns and maintained that their careers would take off from here. That is, though they had been unable to join at higher positions, their long-term interests were still protected and their chances to build up their careers remained intact (Table 1).

> I decided to look for a British or Australian process, if possible at the TL position. Of course, the TL position is difficult if one cannot show one's past experience. But at least the British or Australian process would give me the time to study further. So I planned the switch as much as I could so that I did not lose out any more. To some extent, it worked – I got a British process with a higher salary in a good company. So now I plan to do an MBA (Master of Business Administration). At least, my career was saved.

The job search and transition process varied from three to seven days across the participants, depending on how long it took them to find a position they found acceptable, and following that, on how many days they took to quit their current organization and join the new one. All participants undertook this process towards the end of the month so that they would not be deprived of their salaries. Participants verbally informed a team/process member that they were quitting on their last day or the day after that - they neither served a notice period nor provided a written letter of resignation, and hence had no relieving certificate from the organization.

The behavior of the bullies and of HR managers remained unchanged during this time as did the support coming from the informal social support network.

Participants reported that moving out of the employer organization left them with mixed feelings. On the positive side, participants appreciated the opportunity to start afresh without compromising their career and financial interests. Filled with hope for the future, participants felt they had regained control over their lives. A sense of well-being was apparent. On the negative side, participants felt that they had been overpowered and were incapable of successfully fighting injustice. Loss of self-esteem was reported. Participants expressed their uncertainty over being able to successfully resolve a similar situation in the future. Ambivalence thus accompanied their exit from the organization.

> I was happy that I could get this opportunity. You know, I have got the process of my choice, the TL position – so my career is not spoilt. Plus, the work environment here (in the new organization) is peaceful. But when I think back, I wonder if I gave in too easily, if I could have fought it out better. So that makes me sad.

In the months following their exit from the bullying situation, three participants heard about UNITES (Union for ITES Professionals) Professional, an association that represents employee interests in the Indian ITES-BPO sector, and one participant heard

about the case of Ms. A versus Organization X (an international facing ITES-BPO organization in Mumbai) wherein Ms. A sought and successfully received legal redressal for her complaint of workplace sexual harassment. These participants, realizing that there were various extra-organizational avenues to protect them, felt much stronger in the knowledge that these options allowed them the opportunity to successfully fight injustice rather than be cowered down by it.

Discussion

This study breaks new ground in uncovering the organization's etiological role in workplace bullying, taking forward Leymann's (1996) processual model. Empirical research so far demonstrates organizational antecedents in terms of the work-environment hypothesis (See for example Hoel & Salin, 2003) and the organization as bully (See for example D'Cruz & Noronha, 2008; Liefooghe & Mackenzie Davey, 2001). The findings of this paper add a new dimension by illustrating how the managerial paradigm of HRM, in influencing targets' coping, operates as a source of bullying.

Contrary to Knorz and Zapf's (1996 as cited in Zapf & Gross, 2001) and Zapf and Gross's (2001) findings that organizational intervention is critical to resolving the problem and facilitating successful coping, the findings show that HRM as a managerial ideology creates an environment in which bullying remains unchallenged, allowed to thrive or actually encouraged in an indirect way (Lewis & Rayner, 2003). This goes against common associations of HRM as having the greatest involvement in matters of workplace bullying in terms of policy, procedure and a mediating role (Lewis & Rayner). Instead, by specifically pinpointing the contribution of HR strategies, the findings extend Rayner's (1999) view that seeking redressal adversely affects both the bullying situation and targets' coping. Indeed, the espousal of inclusivist and exclusivist HR strategies creates a situation where HRM operates as one-sided managerialism which privileges employer organizations' interests rather than as true unitarism which engages employers and employees together in the employment relationship (Lewis & Rayner). Clearly, inclusivist and exclusivist HR strategies, being less transparent with respect to bullying, could encompass an environment in which bullying exists, but within the subtleties of management rhetoric and corporate culture through "shared" beliefs. While this creates problems in identifying the situation as bullying, once it is identified, the employee as a stakeholder is in possession of nothing more than their own individual voice. The absence of collective voice as a result of a unitarist managerial HRM ideology renders employees completely vulnerable, with no avenues for redressal (Lewis & Rayner). Issues of justice and morality inevitably arise. Miller's (1998) procedural justice and outcome justice are particularly relevant. With managers being judge and jury combined, the correctness of managerial decisions remains largely unchecked under such a unitarist managerial HRM regime (Lewis & Rayner).

Interestingly, then, though the absence of discursive and pluralist ideologies limited alternatives available to agents both in terms of world views and actions, no greater is their relevance than in the context of unitarist managerial HRM. Thus, while HRM is portrayed as diminishing the need for trade union representation through its central principle of commitment (Guest, 1998), that trade unions have survived and are being revived indicates that HRM's unitarist ideology has not be wholly successful. That

bullying accounts for some part of the reason why HRM's unitarist ideology has broken down cannot be denied (Lewis & Rayner, 2003). Ironside and Seifert (2003) and Hoel and Beale (2006) assert that solutions to workplace bullying essentially lie in pluralist approaches through collectivist endeavors. Bullying is less likely to occur and is more likely to be tackled when it does occur if there is a strong and well organized trade union presence at the workplace (Ironside & Seifert).

Another important contribution comes in the form of insights into the exit coping response. That is, our findings show that the exit response blurs the distinction between problem-focused and emotion-focused, active and avoidance, adaptive and maladaptive, and constructive and destructive coping strategies. While it does not resolve the bullying situation, the exit response is nonetheless an active strategy that provides a solution. Though it involves avoiding the problematic situation, exit provides targets with hope for the future and a sense of control over their lives. That participants were able to move to similar, if not better, jobs in the same sector, without damage to their financial positions and career interests, favorably aided their coping. In this way, the positive state and well-being that the exit coping response induces are adaptive and constructive. Yet participants' concomitant feeling of having been defeated and victimized and of having been treated unfairly and unjustly as well as of powerlessness and defencelessness which persists, creates a negative state which brings into play emotion-focused strategies and could precipitate maladaptiveness and destructiveness (Burger, 2004).

In conclusion, it is relevant to mention that this work, apart from providing evidence of the existence of victimization within an oppressive work regime (Hoel & Beale, 2006), addresses methodological concerns raised in the substantive area (Cowie, Naylo, Rivers, Smith, & Pereira, 2002; Hoel & Beale; Hoel, Einarsen, Keashly, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003). Through the adoption of qualitative methodology, the study allows for a holistic and contextualized understanding of target coping that demonstrates the linkage between micro and macro organizational levels and highlights the political underpinnings of workplace bullying. Given its ontological-epistemological position, the study facilitates theoretical generalizability (Thompson, 1999).

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