Targets’ Constructions of Workplace Bullying: An empirically derived model of the workplace bullying process

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Abstract: Workplace bullying is a complex form of conflict that has a negative impact on business and management, yet despite over two decades of research, prevalence remains high. Extant research has focused on the various elements of bullying, including negative behaviours, antecedents, and interventions, but an overarching, multi-directional, empirically based framework for the process of bullying is missing. To remedy the gap, this paper uses thematically analysed data from semi-structured interviews to propose a model of workplace bullying. The model provides the contexts through to the resolution, via the changing relationships that extenuate this phenomenon. Identification and illumination of the stages of the process provides insight for both practitioners and academics in the ongoing search for a comprehensive resolution of this issue.

Keywords: Workplace bullying process, New Zealand, HRM, complexity, conflict management.

BACKGROUND
In recent years, workplace bullying has become recognised as a severe form of workplace abuse (Fox & Cowan, 2014), that creates complex difficulties for organisations. Bullying typically involves a series of minor, unpleasant interactions and conflicts that have a major impact cumulatively. This behaviour produces a negative environment for employees, and sometimes for other stakeholders, such as customers, ultimately resulting in damage and ill-effects for targets and increased costs for businesses as a result of illness, lost productivity, recruitment, retention, and potentially lost custom (Djurkovic, McCormack, & Casimir, 2008; Glibek, Matthiesen, Hetland & Einarsen, 2014; Mathisen, Einarsen & Mykletun, 2008; O’Moore, Seigne, McGuire & Smith, 1998; Rayner & Cooper, 1997). In New Zealand, bullying is considered to be a significant hazard in the workplace (Bentley et al., 2009) and one that requires more focused attention, especially from Human Resource workers (Thirlwall, in press; Woodrow & Guest, 2014).

Workplace bullying literature has tended to focus on measuring the extent and type of workplace bullying acts, investigating specific aspects of the bullying environment, such as antecedent issues (Salin, 2003a), the workplace environment (Skogstad, Torsheim, Einarsen, & Hauge, 2011) and interventions (Vartia & Leka, 2011). A popular measure of workplace bullying, the Negative Acts Questionnaire (NAQ), focuses on inappropriate behaviours, such as shouting, unfairness, and rudeness (Einarsen & Hoel, n.d.). Behaviours may be classified as direct personal attacks, such as belittling remarks and persistent criticism, and indirect personal attacks, such as isolation and undermining (Bartlett & Bartlett, 2011; Preventing and responding to workplace bullying, p 7). Whilst most of the behaviours may appear trivial individually, targets experience considerable distress and damage, which suggests that negative behaviours may be part of more complex experience. Clearly such behaviours play an important role in bullying, but investigations into the impact of negative behaviours, on areas such as employees’ job performance or stress, tend to lack a context, and measuring acts alone provides no insight into either the use of agency or the responsibility targets take for recognising and addressing their difficulties. Finally the role of the wider environment on the experience of workplace bullying, for example, the impact of HR workers’ responses, has received limited coverage. Therefore, this paper moves beyond behaviours to illuminate the broader experience of bullying, from the initial scene setting through to resolution.
Extant literature provides a useful introduction to the concept of a process that encompasses acts by colleagues (Leymann, 1996) and supervisors (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003); however, neither of these conceptualisations provides a comprehensive, empirically based account of workplace bullying. Furthermore, the existence of bullying by subordinates is unacknowledged in existing processes. Therefore, in this paper I aim to address these gaps by using empirically based data to broaden the focus and present a comprehensive model of the bullying process.

CONCEPTUALISING WORKPLACE BULLYING AND ITS PROCESS

Currently, workplace bullying is in a state of denotative hesitancy (Lutgen-Sandvik & Tracy, 2012), in that lacks an agreed definition; however, some key themes have emerged (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011). In this study, workplace bullying is defined as repeated, hostile acts that are harmful to the recipient (Preventing and responding to workplace bullying, p 6; Thirlwall, 2011). Although pioneering scholars, such as Field (1996) and Keashly (1998) have provided detailed lists of potentially abusive acts, Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, & Alberts’ (2006) proposal that any behaviour that makes a person feel bullied be classified as abusive is the most inclusive, so this is the approach adopted in this study.

Certain features help to define bullying. The presence of harm is vital, because recipients may interpret the same behaviours in quite different ways; therefore, without harm bullying cannot exist (Lee, 2000; Namie & Namie, 2000; Quine, 1999; Randall, 1997). Harm may be both psychological and physical, and typically targets experience symptoms associated with stress, such as distress, headaches, and nausea (Davenport, Schwartz, & Elliott, 1999; Field, 1996; Namie & Namie, 2000; Needham, 2003), insomnia, inability to concentrate, and in some cases Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Lee, 2000; Leymann, 1990). Persistence is also a defining feature, so behaviours need to be recurrent and ongoing (Einarsen, 1999; Field, 1996; Keashly, 1998; Lee, 2000; Namie & Namie, 2000). Directionality is flexible within an organization’s hierarchy; (e.g., upwards from subordinates to managers, downwards from senior staff to subordinates, or horizontally between employees working broadly at the same level). Finally, targets may be the focus of individual perpetrators or of mobs of perpetrators.

Despite negative behaviours, their consequences, and other features playing a vital role in workplace bullying, the process constitutes a more complex set of interactions (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003; Lewis, 2006). Extant literature conceptualises the bullying process as involving a number of phases: starting with an initial incident, moving through a range of bullying behaviours, during which the target moves through phases of disbelief or denial and eventually becomes exhausted by the process, whilst those in positions of authority typically do not manage the situation appropriately and the support of colleagues dwindles, followed by the target’s removal from the workplace (Leymann, 1990; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003). The cycle regenerates when the perpetrator turns his or her attention to another person, thus starting the process again (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003). These processes suggest that bullying is much more than a one off event or a series of unrelated actions.

Whilst providing a helpful insight, current process models have limitations. Specifically, they have limited empirical support and conceptualizations of the directionality, precipitating processes, resistance, and outcomes of the bullying processes are also limited. Leymann’s model defines directionality narrowly, as horizontal bullying in the form of mobbing by colleagues; whilst Lutgen-Sandvik’s model concentrates on downward abusive behaviour from supervisors. Neither model applies to those who experience upward bullying from subordinates. The models also have limited recognition of the precipitating processes, identified by Salin (2003a), that encourage bullying and enable it to thrive, thus rendering them somewhat acontextual. In addition, resistance by targets and the constraints they face when resisting bullying receive scant attention in both models; consequently, the range of responses from targets, as depicted in the
two models, is perhaps unduly limited. Finally, both models have only identified one outcome, the departure of the target; however, it seems likely that other outcomes are possible. A more comprehensive model, that incorporates the context and a broader range of experiences of workplace bullying, appears to be required, which leads to the research question:

RQ: How do targets of workplace bullying construct its process?

METHOD
Using semi-structured interviews, I collected data from 27 volunteers, including academics, managers, technicians, and administrators, and 13 Human Resources (HR) workers, all from Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics (ITPs) in New Zealand. All of the interviewees were working, or had worked, full-time and all had several years of experience in the sector. I chose this group because workers in the education sector may experience high levels of bullying (Leymann, 1996; O’Driscoll et al., 2011; Zapf, Knorz, & Kulla, 1996) and it had been noted that New Zealand has a greater prevalence of bullying compared to Europe and the USA (Thirlwall & Haar, 2010). The semi-structured approach allowed relevant, emergent themes to be explored and gave breadth to the interviews, whilst keeping a focus on the subject area. Interviews lasted two hours on average. Participants included volunteers who expressed interest via a website that I created to raise awareness of the study. Volunteers were a purposive group that had experiences of workplace bullying (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2008; O’Leary, 2005). The selection criteria included working, or having worked at an ITP, and wanting to contribute experiences or views of bullying at work; however, it transpired that all had been targets of bullying. The semi-structured interviews focused on volunteers’ experiences of bullying and involved them telling their story in their own words in response to the question “Tell me about the bullying situation you experienced”. I asked probing questions, such as “What did you do about it?”, “How did you cope?”, “Why do you think that you were upset/bothered?”, and “What could have helped you in the situation?” to gain a richer understanding of the stories. HR workers were nominated by organisations participating in the study and they were asked to explain their organisations’ approach to managing bullying; however, four HR workers also described their experiences of being a target of bullying at work, so these stories were added to the volunteers’ responses, which resulted in 31 sets of bullying experiences.

I transcribed the digitally recorded interviews verbatim then used thematic analysis to explore the ways organisations responded to reports of bullying. Thematic analysis is a qualitative approach used for “identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) in data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 79) and, by using sections of data incorporating multiple occurrences of the same thread of meaning, I was able to develop themes from the data. Following repeated reviews of the data, a pattern appeared to be emerging, so I designed a model to illustrate the relationships among the themes. I validated and refined the initial model design by reviewing it with two of the interviewees, whose transcripts were not part of the development, and three colleagues, who had knowledge of the subject, to ensure that it captured the all themes; this process confirmed that saturation had taken place (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). I then conducted a final check against the remaining transcripts to confirm the model’s robustness and to ensure that it required no further changes. Results of this process are presented in the next section.

FINDINGS
Themes from the interview analysis provide a comprehensive framework to explain targets’ experiences when displayed in a model. The experience of bullying emerged as an iterative process that starts and ends with a change (or the threat of a change) that was only resolved when the immediate work relationship ended. Although interviewees provided diverse accounts of their experiences, including examples of bullying emanating from managers, subordinates, and colleagues, when the stories were broken down into themes, these accounts invariably followed the same process, as shown in figure 1.
The process begins with *precipitating structures* and *target selection*. These initial elements of the process set the scene and they are prerequisites for bullying to commence. An actual, or proposed, significant change to work relationships, such as restructuring or a new team member provided a suitable environment for bullying to germinate. The second vital prerequisite for the process to begin is the target selection. Targets said they were chosen because they: (1) stood out from their colleagues, often by presenting a perceived threat of some sort to the perpetrator, (2) stood up to the perpetrator and presented a challenge in some way, or (3) stood back and allowed the perpetrator to take advantage of them; for example one manager described how he stood out when he moved from a city to a rural community, as follows: “I was an outsider; I was quite flamboyant, with bright ties, and a bit in your face”. Overall, targets reported that their difference from the perpetrator, or from the perpetrator’s expectations, especially when the difference was negatively valenced (e.g., threatening or weaker), led to their selection for bullying.

These elements have a dotted line relationship to the rest of the model because their presence did not automatically lead to bullying. For example, employees in an organisation that is undertaking a restructure of its operations will not necessarily be subjected to bullying, but there is a greater likelihood that this may happen (Salin, 2003b). Similarly, when a perpetrator selects a potential target for bullying, a suitable environment must be in place to permit bullying to develop. Bullying involves repeated actions, so organisations that are settled, and those that actively implement anti-bullying measures, seem less likely to provide a suitable environment for bullying to gain purchase.

Once the precipitating processes are in place and the target selection has occurred, the main process begins with a *trigger* event. A trigger is an occurrence that is responsible for the start of bullying. Typically, targets were able to attribute the start of their bullying to a specific incident or event. The incidents mainly revolved around conflict, such as an argument, disagreement, or an unpopular decision. One manager remarked, “The day I said ‘no’ to something, when I thought ‘No, we shouldn't be spending our money on this we should be putting our resources elsewhere’, I bought a fight and that fight was well and truly orchestrated”, which suggests that operational decisions can provide sufficient impetus for upward bullying to commence. Alternatively, some targets attributed the bullying trigger to the onset of health issues, as shown by the following example:
I had a road accident and nearly croaked [died], but managed to survive. [After that] it was almost like I stood out as the weak link in the department. [The manager] and I weren’t best buddies before it all happened anyhow, but it just got so much worse.

Existing research shows that perpetrators choose to bully people they view as different to themselves (Adams & Crawford, 1992; Leymann, 1990) or who need extra support (Salin, 2003b), so these findings might well be expected. Together with precipitating structures and target selection, the trigger theme helps clarify the nature of the initial process that leads to the onset of bullying. Once triggered, bullying begins in earnest and the perpetrator subjects the target to abusive acts repeatedly.

Targets typically reported experiencing several different types of abusive behaviour and these actions were grouped within the subthemes of aggression, unfair work conditions, dishonesty, and ostracism. The majority of abusive behaviour was associated with aggression or an unprovoked attack on a person or group of people. Verbal aggression was by far the most prominent variety of abusive behaviour reported within this subtheme and it included shouting and personal attacks, threats of disciplinary action and job losses or redundancies, and finally jokes and inappropriate teasing. Written aggression and non-verbal aggression were less frequent but no less distressing, for example one target described his manager’s behaviour thus:

He used very threatening body language, and proximity, and waving fingers, that sort of thing….He insisted on closed doors, small room, proxemic\(^1\)-type power games; he seemed to know how to make people feel small and stupid.

The second most frequent abusive behaviour was unfair work conditions, which included denying reasonable requests, denying employment rights, and treating targets inequitably; for example, putting unreasonable pressure on someone who is medically unfit for work. The third subtheme is dishonesty, which included managers, colleagues, and subordinates spreading rumours, such as referring to non-existent student complaints, and managers stealing credit for work. The fourth and final subtheme of abusive behaviour is ostracism, which occurred when targets were systematically, or repeatedly, ignored, shunned, or left out of conversations or events, as follows: “She wouldn’t talk to me. She’d walk in and say hello to everyone else and not say a word to me”. Although less frequent, ostracism has a powerful impact because it can lead to feelings that are similar to physical pain (Williams, 2001, 2008). It is important to note that whilst most of these behaviours might have reasonable explanations or rationales individually, when part of an ongoing pattern of negative behaviour they are likely to be seen as bullying.

To manage the broad range of negative behaviours, targets had several resistance or coping strategies available to them; however, antecedent constraints limited their choices. In the model these constraints are recognised as the personal and structural factors that influenced how targets responded to bullying, such as not being able to get another job without taking a pay cut or moving house. Some were concerned about the organisation’s complaints processes, and one person remarked: “I suppose I was scared about the outcome too, you know. What would happen if he managed to turn full circle somehow?” Having considered their personal contexts, targets then selected their resistance strategy, most targets used a combination of active and passive resistance strategies, whilst some also used paradoxical approaches.

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\(^1\) Associated with spatial issues and physical distances between people, for example, standing so close to a person that the other person feels uncomfortable.
Active resistance involves actions that are usually authorised by the organisation, such as using existing complaints processes (Ashforth & Mael, 1998) and tends to involve open, deliberate acts that require agency, such as making complaints. Active resistance often involved HR workers, managers, and union representatives, and typically concerns and complaints were sequestered by these bodies. Organisational sequestering occurs when organisations fail, either actively or passively, to take responsibility for workplace bullying (Thirlwall, 2011, in press). In this study, sequestering involved setting aside bullying by (1) reframing issues, (2) rejigging the workplace, and (3) rebuffing the target’s complaints. Reframing involved viewing targets’ complaints of bullying as personal issues, such as the target or perpetrator’s personality or the target’s private life, trivial matters (e.g., “My boss wanted me to resolve it over a coffee”), denying their existence, and claiming the target complained as a form of defence to avoid disciplinary action (despite none being pending). Rejigging the workplace involved setting up systems to enable targets to work around perpetrators, such as by temporarily changing reporting lines or providing extra support, as an interviewee explained “We just circumvented the dean and the management relationship because relating to [the dean] was just too difficult; it was too painful”, but without attempting to resolve the underlying problems. Finally, rebuffing provided a third way of deterring targets from making complaints. Rebuffs included the use of veiled threats or ignoring issues, and denying help, as shown in the next example:

HR said that this would be on my record, this complaint; they went down that road first. They said, “This makes it official” with quotation marks. “This will be recorded and will involve a lot of people. Walls are thin.”

Union representatives could be unwilling to provide support too, as this example suggests: “I had people along the way going ‘We can’t be involved in this’, because the union delegates are actually members of staff, and they didn’t want to be involved. It was horrendous”. The identification of sequestering is important, because setting aside complaints about workplace bullying results in problems remaining unresolved and sometimes being magnified, thus adding to the target’s experiences of abusive behaviour.

Other forms of resistance were usually unauthorised by the organisation (Ashforth & Mael, 1998) and they increased the risk of the target being blamed for their situation; however, they did enable the target to avoid sequestering. Targets sometimes used informal forms of active resistance, such as confronting perpetrators with sarcasm, out-of-character swearing, and occasionally humour. Targets reported that these approaches enabled them to regain some control over the relationship temporarily, possibly by shocking the perpetrator. Two further forms of resistance also avoided sequestering but these tended to be less helpful. Passive resistance involved targets seeking support outside their organisation, and avoiding coming to the attention of the perpetrator, such as not speaking at meetings or keeping a distance, as the following example shows:

I handled it by not being so available and withdrawing just to a level of compliance. I never volunteer any more, I never give my opinion, but I do all the things that are necessary to be done [for my job].

Paradoxical resistance provided a higher risk approach that involved acts or comments that observers might see as abusive, manipulative or difficult behaviour, such as threats of violence, work-to-rule, and malicious gossip about a perpetrator. Both forms of resistance tended to involve people from outside the organisation, such as family and friends, and potentially had a
major impact; for example, one target said her husband: “….used to get very upset for me to the point where he was quite willing to come and punch [my manager] out”. These approaches may provide some comfort to targets but they do not resolve the process, and can make matters considerably worse in some cases.

Solutions to workplace bullying transpired eventually. It emerged that full resolution occurred only when the perpetrator and target no longer worked together, which was achieved by either the perpetrator or the target leaving the direct work relationship, but not necessarily the organisation. No other examples of resolutions emerged and no-one was able to work in a trusting relationship with their perpetrator again. Furthermore, there were no examples of perpetrators or targets being moved to resolve the problems. Typically, both perpetrators and targets left of their own volition, as this target’s example shows: “After a lot of frustrating months, first of all trying to cure it, of course, then trying to understand it, then realising I couldn’t fix it, I walked, in the same institute, but a different department”. No-one reported a perpetrator being removed owing to bullying; however, when one left the improvement in the workplace was palpable, as this example suggests: “Our manager was seconded to another position…and it was almost like you could feel the whole department go ‘Ahhhh’ (exhale). It was just lovely; everybody was almost lighter. The change, just not having her physically there, was wonderful.” Therefore, a change of the composition of the workgroup may precipitate workplace bullying and provide its resolution.

To conclude this section, a key finding in this study is that targets construct the experience of bullying as an eight-stage, iterative process. This process formed a model that comprises antecedents of (1) precipitating structure and (2) target selection, followed by (3) the events that trigger bullying, (4) abusive behaviours, (5) constraints that limit targets’ actions, (6) forms of resistance, (7) the ways in which organisations sequester bullying, and (8) means by which the process is resolved.

DISCUSSION
To answer the research question, targets of workplace bullying construct its process as iterative and one in which they have very limited control. Key points to note are that bullying starts with a change or the threat of a change, usually in the structure of the workgroup, as noted by Salin (2003b). As change is a dominant feature of modern work life, this suggests that the potential for occurrences of workplace bullying is high. Ironically, the only way that bullying is fully resolved is with a further change of relationships and the departure of key personnel (i.e., the perpetrator or target). However, it is important to note that simply separating the parties is unlikely to rectify the problems if the perpetrator remains in the organisation, as sooner or later this person is likely to select a new target and the bullying process will start again (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003). Furthermore, my findings suggest that breaking relationships did not automatically remedy the harm caused by bullying and the overall experience had long lasting effects on other aspects of work, such as organisational commitment, as this example shows: “I still feel even now [two years after the perpetrator left] I don't feel any ownership of this place anymore. It's just a job now. I used to put a lot of energy into it but now I've just switched off to everything really”. Other former targets, who thought they had recovered from their experiences and moved on with their lives, became very distressed when they recounted their stories, which suggests that bullying has longer-term implications and is not easily remedied. Therefore, participants in this study constructed bullying as an episode--albeit one that could last for many years--that disrupted regular, respectful work relationships and had a lasting impact on employees.

During the interviews, aggression emerged strongly as a form of abusive behaviour, yet it is less prevalent in the bullying literature. A possible reason for the difference is methodological, in that in surveys, such as the NAQ, respondents are provided with a list and asked if negative behaviours ever happened, but they do not indicate prominence or personal significance. In the
interviews, people told their stories and mentioned those behaviours that were prominent or important to them, not all possible behaviours. This observation highlights the importance of multiple data collection approaches.

The process model makes an important contribution to knowledge by filling gaps in the existing literature. Most importantly, it is the first such model to be based on a systematic analysis of targets’ experiences. The current model thus extends those of Leymann (1990) and Lutgen-Sandvik (2003) by incorporating all types of directionality, (i.e., downward, horizontal, and upward). Furthermore, the model addresses targets’ varying rationales for the ways in which they chose to resist bullying, which adds a new dimension to existing models. Finally, the new model provides a further contribution to literature by identifying two ways of resolving bullying, compared to the single way offered by existing models. Each of the elements of the process model links to subsequent stages, and targets may make numerous iterations of the model, depending on the type of resistance they use and its effectiveness. The acknowledgement of agency in the forms of constraints and resistance suggest that targets do their best to manage in their specific circumstances, but despite their attempts organisations are typically unhelpful. Organisational sequestering, by reframing, rejigging, and rebuffing targets concerns, maintains the status quo at best; at worst it can make a bad situation unbearable. Acknowledging the iterative cycle of the bullying process is important, as it reflects the persistent, repetitive nature of bullying.

Representing the episode as a process model enables the various stages, and their relationships to each other, to be understood. This representation is likely to be particularly useful for targets, as they tend to have difficulty attributing meaning to their experiences. It may also provide insight for those with management responsibilities and others trying to understand the workplace bullying process. Knowing that situations will end eventually may provide some comfort for all concerned.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR HR**

Ultimately workplace bullying is a product of the various relationships between employees. Unsurprisingly, workplace relationships—especially changes to such relationships or variations from the norm—featured prominently in several different contexts in this study. Changes could prompt the start of bullying, serve as a method of sequestering and avoiding bullying, or provide a resolution.

The first way in which changes in work relationships influenced bullying was in precipitating structures. Targets cited new people, managers, colleagues, and subordinates as being associated with the onset of bullying. For example, a new manager with a set of expectations that do not meld with the existing culture might produce a disruption that provides a suitable environment for the onset of bullying. In this study, new managers abused subordinates, but sometimes new managers became targets of upward bullying by subordinates. Similarly, a new colleague in a team could cause disruption that allowed bullying to commence. Whilst new members may often join work groups with little apparent negative impact (or indeed with a positive effect), the frequent mention by targets of new members precipitating bullying episodes is noteworthy. New members may create tensions that need to be managed as existing roles and relationships are threatened. Indeed all relationships (workplace and otherwise) involve common tensions to be managed (Bridge & Baxter, 1992; Zorn, 1995). Therefore, changes in the structure of the workgroup may sometimes provide an environment that enables bullying to commence and thrive. HR has a direct responsibility for selection of employees, so this is an area that could be actively managed to reduce any negative impact.

Secondly, HR workers in this study were said to have altered work relationships to reduce the
amount of contact between targets and perpetrators in order to mitigate the effects of bullying. Rejigging, a form of organisational sequestering, provided a way of allowing targets and perpetrators to continue to work by minimising or managing contact (Thirlwall, in press). Examples of such changes included altered reporting lines and having HR workers act as supporters in meetings. Although these changes were helpful for targets temporarily, they had the effect of sequestering, or setting aside, the underlying problems rather than resolving them. Failing to manage bullying is likely to produce a workplace that appears to condone abusive behaviour leading to further problems (Rayner, Hoel, & Cooper, 2002; Zapf, 1999). Clearly this is an area in which HR workers could consider ways to improve their approach to managing the issues underpinning bullying in their organisations.

Finally, permanently changing the work group provided the only solution to bullying from the perspective of targets. When perpetrators left for other positions that took them away from the target’s workgroup, bullying ceased for that target. Similarly, when targets went to work for different parts of their organisation, or left for new positions, they moved away from bullying situations. When perpetrators departed this provided a sense of relief and allowed targets to work in a non-abusive environment again. These findings are particularly important because they provide solutions for targets and indicate that HR workers should refocus their efforts on providing an environment in which perpetrators are unable to thrive.

In summary, changes in work relationships are an important feature of workplace bullying and an area that HR can actively influence and manage. The process model draws attention to the stages that targets experience and the feedback loops highlight the trap that targets struggle to escape. Using the model to gain greater awareness, HR workers can devise ways to minimise the negative impact of workplace bullying for both targets and the organisation as a whole.

LIMITATIONS
Like all research, some aspects of the present study limit its findings. A few of the interviewees were discussing events that had occurred months and occasionally years previously, so it is possible that their recollections may have altered over time; however, some interviewees brought supporting documentation, which suggests that they were keen to be consistent. Confidential interviews preclude checks of the veracity of the experiences reported and using mainly self-selecting respondents means the sample is not representative of the general population. However, the self-selecting approach may be appropriate when studying groups that have the most severe experience of a phenomenon (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2008). Furthermore, people who have no first-hand experience of the phenomenon are likely to experience invisibility and choose not to participate, as the study will appear to have little relevance to them (Gilbert & Malone, 1995). The use of first-hand experiences may explain the rich vein of experience that the findings reveal. However, the narrow industry focus and relatively homogeneous sample may limit generalisations and a broader cross section of workers might have produced different outcomes.

FUTURE RESEARCH
Future studies in New Zealand should also look to collect data from a wider array of employees and perhaps use a slightly different methodology, for example, using a defined group rather than volunteers within a broader group, to reduce response bias. Clearly, there is a need for further research to establish whether the qualitative findings of the present study are merely an anomaly related to this particular sector, where perhaps respondents have used the interviews in the absence of other suitable avenues for communicating their experiences, or whether there is a systemic problem in New Zealand higher education. To establish a broader picture, replication of the process used and developed in this study could occur in other sectors and countries. Specifically, by using the workplace bullying process model with other targets and also by
testing quantitatively, it should be possible to confirm its efficacy.

CONCLUSIONS
The proposed workplace bullying process model provides a comprehensive framework that summarises thematic groupings of a broad range of grounded experiences. The model incorporates the most frequent form of bullying, downward, and the less frequent forms of horizontal and upward bullying. Furthermore, the model shows the full process of bullying, including its context, from the perspective of targets, which supplements existing knowledge. It acknowledges the role and limitations of target agency. Finally, the process draws attention to the role of organisations in the continuation and escalation of this phenomenon.

Further research using the model in other settings, such as in various industries or other countries and developing quantitative measures linked to the elements of the model may yield interesting results that lead to more effective intervention. Until additional processes are developed, the current model should provide a useful contribution to literature that will also add to practical understanding of workplace bullying.
REFERENCES


