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Bystanders in workplace bullying: working university students' perspectives on action versus inaction

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There is increasing interest in bystanders to workplace bullying, including from human resource management (HRM) perspectives. This paper draws on literature from the fields of sexual harassment and helping behaviour to develop understanding of bystander action and inaction. Part of a project on workplace bullying, this study used online story-based responses from university students in Australia, India and Turkey with workplace experience to elicit bystander and target interpretations of the behaviour. Findings suggest that even when bystanders are aware of bullying, they do not always intervene for reasons ranging from powerlessness and fear to avoidance and ignorance. Helping behaviours, including private support or making a report, were described by some respondents, with contextual factors linked to the perpetrator or the organisation influencing responses. The importance of the HRM role in facilitating bystander action, drawing on the helping behaviour and sexual harassment literature, is a focus of the findings and implications.

Keywords: bystanders, helping behaviour, human resource management, participant stories, sexual harassment, workplace bullying

Key points

1. Action/inaction of bystanders to workplace bullying is a product of a range of factors including context.
2. To better understand bystander responses, theories relating to helping behaviour and sexual harassment provide guidance.
3. Imbuing feelings of responsibility and empowerment are strategies to encourage bystander action.
4. Organisational climate, culture and context, especially trust, can help promote positive action from bystanders.
5. Human resource practitioners have a key role in creating environments where bystanders help ameliorate workplace bullying.

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Human resource practitioners (HRPs) are increasingly being exhorted to pay attention to the role of bystanders in the amelioration of workplace bullying, a phenomenon receiving greater attention in research and practice (Branch, Ramsay and Barker 2013; Mulder et al. 2017). Such exhortations are in keeping with the long-held view that the employee advocacy role of HRPs is critical to the amelioration and prevention of mistreatment at work (D'Cruz and Noronha 2010; Hanley and O'Rourke 2016; Harrington, Rayner and Warren 2012; Lewis and Rayner 2003), and the well-being of targets, perpetrators, bystanders and organisations (D'Cruz 2015). This view, interestingly, has been found to apply to HRPs addressing workplace bullying across the globe, emphasising that the complexities associated with tackling instances of mistreatment are largely similar across countries (e.g. Cowan and Fox 2015 (USA); D'Cruz and Noronha 2010 (India); Harrington, Rayner and Warren 2012 (UK); Kırel 2007 (Turkey); Thirlwall 2015 (New Zealand)). While many studies focus on episodes, incidence, antecedents and outcomes of workplace bullying (e.g. Branch, Ramsay and Barker 2013; Nielsen, Matthiesen and Einarsen 2010; Samnani and Singh 2012), research which concentrates on people other than the target or the perpetrator is also increasing (e.g. Mulder et al. 2017; Pellegrini, Gonçalves and Tolfo 2018). Incidents of bullying do not take place in a vacuum but rather within the context of the workplace (D'Cruz and Noronha 2011). The action and inaction of those around the perpetrator and target contribute to the environment and the impact of events, making this an important area for increased understanding and intervention by HRPs, particularly since the latter must balance their employee advocacy and business partner roles in contemporary workplaces (D'Cruz, Noronha and Beale 2014; Ulrich 2016). HR policy and practice across the globe is recognised to include variation derived from context including the countries in which the organisation is operating (Farndale, Mayrhofer and Brewster 2018), and this includes the views on workplace bullying (Salin et al. 2018, 2019). Recently and importantly following a multi-country study, Salin et al. (2018, 19), however, found 'little support for the role of cultural factors in explaining responses to workplace bullying'.

Exploration of the role and influence of bystanders is one of the more recent developments in workplace bullying research (Mulder et al. 2017), and is only a small part of the HR literature (e.g. Paull, Omari and Standen 2012; Wu and Wu 2018). The nascent bystander literature has provided us with some understanding of the range of responses while identifying factors that influence bystander behaviour. Our paper builds on this by drawing on the related sexual harassment and helping behaviour literatures which hold important clues to deepen our understanding of bystander action and inaction, and implications for HR practice. We draw on a study undertaken as part of a larger project where online story gathering was used to investigate bystander responses to bullying in workplaces as reported by university students with work experience. Our paper seeks to make recommendations for HRPs.

The paper begins by connecting bystander behaviour in workplace bullying and sexual harassment with helping behaviour. The study background and method are then

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elaborated. The findings are presented, with links to the sexual harassment literature as a focus. The paper closes by highlighting theoretical contributions relating the findings to the helping behaviour literature and that of the workplace bullying – human resource management (HRM) interface. Practical implications for HRPs are put forward as a result.

Bystander behaviour at work: the field so far

Workplace bullying leads to increased levels of absenteeism and turnover, not just for the target, but also others in the organisation (Hoel et al. 2011). Research has identified that the effect on bystanders, including physical and emotional strain (D'Cruz and Noronha 2011; Sims and Sun 2012), and their propensity to develop symptoms of depression (Emdad et al. 2013; Hoel et al. 2011), is likely to have an impact on the whole organisation. Nearly 20 years ago, Salin (2001) pointed out that even when bystanders are aware of workplace bullying, they do not directly intervene. Despite this early research, Mulder et al. (2014) reported a lack of studies associated with antecedents of bystanders' propensity to help in bullying situations, reflecting limited progress since Hoel et al. (2003) highlighted their importance. An increasing number of researchers (e.g. Cooper-Thomas et al. 2014; D'Cruz and Noronha 2011, 2014; MacCurtain et al. 2018; Rayner and Bowes-Sperry 2008; Wu and Wu 2018) have posited that it is important to raise the awareness of bystanders, and equip them to intervene. It is important to better understand this unique group, and their reasons for action or inaction when they witness or become aware of bullying.

Intervention is not the only role bystanders can play, with the typology developed by Paull, Omari and Standen (2012) offering 13 bystander roles, described them in relation to the perpetrator and/or the target. With roles being both active and passive, only five of these are constructive; with the remainder being destructive. Linstead (2013) argued it reduced the behaviour of bystanders to mere categories and recast the 13 types into 8, identifying only two as bystanders, and referring to the others as active accessories, whistleblower, witness, mediator, advocate, indexical victim, post-hoc comforter, and collateral victims (see Table 1).

Linstead's classification, with only two types of third parties as bystanders, is narrow in its interpretation. Third parties are not static in their stance or role in harassment scenarios (Bowes-Sperry and O'Leary-Kelly 2005). This has implications in the workplace bullying context, where action or inaction can change depending on a range of factors and as events unfold (D'Cruz 2015). Further, unlike in the situation associated with the bystander effect – such as in the Kitty Genovese case – where the actions of others are evaluated based on who is around when the abusive episode takes place (Latané and Darley 1970) – in the organisational context, bystanders, witnesses, accomplices or fellow victims may not be present when bullying occurs. They are also more likely to have a pre-existing relationship with perpetrators and targets and to adopt a position relative to that relationship, and to their like or dislike of the individuals involved (Standen, Paull and Omari 2014), influenced by the climate or environment of the organisation (D'Cruz and

Table 1 Comparison of Paull, Omari and Standen (2012) and Linstead (2013) typologies

Paull, Omari and Standen's (2012) label	Paull, Omari and Standen's (2012) description	Linstead (2013) classification
Instigating bystander	Sets up actions of bully; initiator, creates situation	Active accessory
Manipulating bystander	Seeks to influence actions of bully, takes advantage of existing situation	
Collaborating bystander	Actively joins in, assists bully	
Facilitating bystander	Provides audience (fine line to joining in), can be inadvertent	
Abdicating bystander	Silently allows bullying to continue by doing nothing despite being in position to do so	Bystander
Avoiding bystander	Walks away	
Intervening bystander	Takes action to halt bullying or prevent retaliation	Whistleblower witness
Defusing bystander	Involves themselves in preventing escalation of the situation	Mediator
Defending bystander	Stands up for victim	Advocate
Empathising bystander	Identifies with the victim – says/does nothing	Indexical victim
Sympathising bystander	Identifies with the victim – remains silent for fear of becoming target, offers comfort and support in private	Post-hoc comforter
Succumbing bystander	Becomes fellow victim	Collateral victim
Submitting bystander	Substitute victim	

Source: Linstead (2013); Paull, Omari and Standen (2012).

Noronha 2011), and their level of trust in its HRM ideology (Harrington, Rayner and Warren 2012).

The influence of pre-existing workplace relationships between those involved in the bullying scenario was highlighted by D'Cruz and Noronha (2011, 269), who identified 'limits to workplace friendship'. Their evidence is that peers and colleagues in the workplace, especially friends, offer support to the victim in the early stages of bullying, but tend to withdraw from assistance in the face of taking the matter further, owing to prioritising self-interest (D'Cruz and Noronha 2011). This demonstrates that the role of bystander is not static. D'Cruz and Noronha (2010) identified that this change in bystander behaviour is due to the ideology within the workplace which obstructs target attempts at redress and victimises co-workers seen as supporting them (D'Cruz and Noronha 2011), thereby silencing both (D'Cruz 2015). This is consistent with evidence from studies examining bystander actions in relation to sexual harassment (Bowes-Sperry and O'Leary-Kelly 2005; McDonald, Charlesworth and Graham 2016).

Bowes-Sperry and O'Leary-Kelly (2005) developed 13 propositions relating to the possibility of observer intervention when sexual harassment takes place. The factors identified

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as influencing whether bystanders will intervene form the basis of their discussion. Intervention in their model is framed as helping behaviour, with help being provided sometimes because the helper is required to, and sometimes because they choose to assist. They identified two dimensions: level of involvement and immediacy of action. Examples range from the bystander quietly providing advice and support to the target (low involvement and low immediacy) through to public attempts to get the conduct of the harasser denounced (high involvement and high immediacy). They mapped a range of routes to potential bystander intervention which are similar to those mapped for bystanders in other scenarios: bystanders need to recognise the event or scenario as requiring them to do something, identify a personal responsibility to act, decide how urgently this is required, and then weigh up the personal cost benefit of action or inaction. The model is explicitly 'not intended to explain observer intervention (or non-intervention) in other negative work conduct' (Bowes-Sperry and O'Leary-Kelly 2005, 291–292); however, the sensemaking processes which underpin the action or inaction of bystanders in bullying are likely to be similar in their aetiology.

Four key contextual factors were described by McDonald, Charlesworth and Graham (2016) as affecting the responses of bystanders in sexual harassment situations: the degree to which the bystander identifies with the target; fear of the nature of the likely response anticipated from peers, superiors and others in terms of reprisals or sanctions; organisational or workplace norms with respect to tolerance of the behaviour; and proximity to the event or behaviour. Their work identified two factors of importance to this discussion. The first is that where there was potential to help, bystanders were frequently inactive, and the second is that where there was action, it was often 'tentative, temporary, delayed or ineffective' (McDonald, Charlesworth and Graham 2016, 561).

In addition to these findings on bystanders to sexual harassment behaviours, helping behaviour literature more generally provides understanding on bystander behaviours. Assistance or 'helping behaviour' is an area which has been explored as an important form of organisational citizenship: it 'involves voluntarily helping others with, or preventing the occurrence of, work related problems' (Podsakoff et al. 2000, 516). Helping behaviour is interpersonal, 'affiliative, co-operative and directed at other individuals' (Mossholder, Richardson and Settoon 2011, 33). Helping can be personal and include emotional and problem-solving support, or it can be task oriented and include provision of information or active intervention (Lakey and Cohen 2000). Helping can extend to speaking up against perceived injustices (voice) (Goldberg, Clark and Henley 2011), and has been found to be more likely where the bystander identifies with the target, and this identification is greater than the risks or costs associated with speaking up (Levine et al. 2005; see also Pozzoli and Gini 2013 re: schoolyard bullying). Individuals weigh up the cost benefit of action or inaction as part of deciding what to do (Baron and Branscombe 2012).

Mulder et al. (2014), examining bystander action in workplace bullying scenarios, found evidence of gender differences in the helping behaviour of colleagues and bystanders. They identified that the perceived contribution of the target, and the risk of becoming a secondary target, influenced the propensity of the bystander to help the target, but also

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that gender and emotion play a role in the tendency to help (or not). Bystanders who perceived that the target bore some responsibility were less likely to have helping intentions, although this was tempered by anger and sympathy in women, and by anger in men. Anticipated stigma by association also led to lower levels of intentions to help. Mulder et al. (2016, 2017) have further found that attributions contribute to the interpretation of events by bystanders, and thus influence their helping behaviour.

Based on the extant literature, it is surmised that even when bystanders witness or hear about workplace bullying, they may not act to intervene; when they do act, it may not be overt; and further, any action may not be effective in halting the relevant behaviour. So, despite the possibility that a bystander may want to 'help' a target of workplace bullying, they may not act, particularly where there is a potential 'cost to self' in doing so which is perceived to be too great a risk. There are limited studies focusing on the role of HR, in terms of encouraging bystanders to act and creating a bullying free environment. Those studies highlighted the crucial nature of the collective behaviour (D'Cruz and Noronha 2010; Lewis and Rayner 2003) and the importance of sending clear messages against bullying (Richards and Daley 2003), and called for more research to gain deeper understanding of the reasons for and response to different bystander behaviours. Such understanding will provide insights to HRPs to act and devise policies accordingly. Therefore, the ultimate aim of this research is to inform the HRPs' approaches to bystander interventions as one component of the amelioration of workplace bullying.

The research questions were framed as follows: What is the nature of bystander responses to workplace bullying? and What are the perceived reasons for bystander action or inaction, both from the perspective of the target, and of the bystander? The analysis aimed to uncover the influences on bystander behaviour, including any cultural differences, to provide evidence that could be used to identify potential ways in which positive bystander action could be encouraged. These findings would provide insights as to effective or ineffective HR approaches to detecting and managing workplace bullying scenarios.

Methods

This qualitative study was conducted within an interpretivist approach, focusing on participant understandings of their experiences of workplace bullying. Interpretivism preserves the dialectics within multiple perspectives, allowing context, time and complexity to be captured (Creswell 2013; Crotty 1998). Naturalism informed by *verstehen* marks this approach (Bryman and Burgess 1999). Subjectivity and holism characterise the resultant insights, highlighting how meanings are socially negotiated (Creswell 2013; Thorne 2014). The interpretivist approach privileges human consciousness as the basis of reality, emphasising that experiences occur through sense-making which order, classify and structure the world and hence hold implications for decisions and execution pertaining to actions (Prasad 2005). We held that an interpretive approach would provide deep insights

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into the dynamics around bystander behaviour, with emergent themes allowing for valid and potentially effective suggestions for HR practice to emerge.

As part of a larger project to examine cross-cultural differences in workplace bullying, university students in Australia, India and Turkey with workplace experience were recruited to respond to an online survey about their involvement with workplace bullying. The respondents indicated that they worked in diverse settings ranging from entry-level service roles through to mid-level positions in a range of work environments. Open-ended story-based questions sought respondent perspectives on workplace bullying in their own words. A number of questions sought evidence about the roles and actions of bystanders. Those who contributed their stories as targets were asked if there were witnesses present, who they were, what they did, and what the respondent believed to be the reason for their action or inaction. All respondents were asked whether they had been a witness or observer of workplace bullying, whether they had taken any action or not, and why they had responded as they did. Respondents were also asked to relate their experience of instances of rumour and gossip and humour and fun in the workplace, with a view to understanding how these might relate to bystander behaviour in relation to bullying. The data collection process does not offer a triangulation of reports of the same scenarios, nor does it offer the opportunity to make cross-country comparisons due to the nature of the cohort, but does serve to provide insights into individual interpretation of bystander responses to bullying.

Data were collected from business students with workplace experience in Australia, India and Turkey recruited from two universities in Australia, a management school in India and a university in Turkey. These locations were selected due to the locations of the research team. The respondents were mainly postgraduate students, these being considered to be more likely to have a range of workplace experiences. Respondents received the survey link as an open invitation shared in a range of classes. Participation was voluntary, based on informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality and the option of withdrawal in accordance with the ethics approvals in each institution. Student cohorts in each of the three countries included domestic and international students whose work experience ranged from historical to current and the country in which they were studying as well as other countries around the world. In all, 399 students (Australia (AU): 30%; India (IN): 40%; and Turkey (TR): 30%) responded to the survey. Of these 115 (29%) reported having been targets of bullying at work, and 118 (34%) reported having been a witness or bystander.

A thematic coding approach, both top down and bottom up (Saldaña 2013), was taken by the research team and key issues identified in relation to each of the parties to workplace bullying. The evidence was analysed in three phases. First, the data across the whole response set was considered in an aggregated form; and then, each country response set was analysed separately. A cross-country comparison was undertaken to check whether key thematic differences identified in the data could be considered to be country specific in their nature. The analysis was given rigour by the iterative process of compare and contrast between team members in relation to themes and issues identified. For some issues,

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the outcome was identification of a question or anomaly rather than emergence of an area of consistency or saturation (Miles, Huberman and Saldaña 2014).

The emergent approach (Miles, Huberman and Saldaña 2014; Saldaña 2013) led to the identification of a range of recurring themes and issues specifically relating to bystanders. A number of the key themes were evident in all three countries and replicated at country level to varying degrees, with country level analysis revealing indistinct differences between the three groups of students in relation to their interpretation or experience of bystander behaviour. The action or inaction of bystanders became a focus for analysis. Eight different categories of bystander response were identified in the data. These were: no action; spoke to target; spoke to bully; spoke to manager or person in authority; lodged formal complaint; spoke to other witnesses/peers; public defence of target; and, exited the organisation. Some of these categories received very low response counts (e.g. exit the organisation received one response from Australia, and one from Turkey), but could not be clustered with other responses. In addition, some respondents provided a series of responses which showed an escalation or de-escalation of response – for example, responses classified as speaking to a manager led to lodgement of a formal complaint, or speaking to peers led to no action.

Mapping respondent perceptions of the outcomes of bystander responses was also undertaken. Outcomes were classified into seven categories: nothing changed (bullying continued); target anger (where the target was not welcoming of the action by the bystander); under investigation; bullying ceased or reduced; bully received warning; repercussions for bystander, 'don't know' (some of these were due to personnel movements). Some responses were classified into more than one category, for example, where a bully received a warning this was sometimes the complete response, whereas at other times, it was accompanied by evidence that the bullying ceased or reduced, or that it continued. The themes which emerged from the aggregated data were then examined in comparison to the sexual harassment and helping behaviour literature to ascertain consistencies and differences which might inform interpretation. The emergent themes are discussed below.

Action or inaction

The perspectives of the targets

Inaction or limited action by bystanders and witnesses was noted by many of those who told their story of being a target. The reasons attributed to this inaction ranged from powerlessness and fear to avoidance and ignorance, although a few respondents indicated that some witnesses did nothing for reasons which included 'for fun'. This fear or helplessness took a number of forms – having previously been the target the witnesses were glad the bully had moved on, fear of being the next target, a belief that this was a part of the way of things in the organisation, or experience indicated that action did not result in change. One respondent indicated 'Because they thought that this was the way of doing things there, not exceptional!! [emphasis in original]', while others indicated 'Because they were

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the victims before, and I guess they did not want to be the victim again'. In the main, however, the responses indicated that targets thought that witnesses and bystanders did nothing because of their own fear of becoming a target, and because of the limited options for taking action. The limitations of peer support were evident across the data, with respondents identifying that their colleagues and friends 'understood but didn't want to get involved'. The data also indicated that there were instances where others joined in, and perpetuated the bullying, by encouraging the perpetrator: 'Probably they enjoyed the proceedings', although this was a much less common type of response.

The perspectives of the bystander

Respondents who indicated that they had been a bystander reported feeling unable to act, either in fear of the perpetrator or organisational response, or powerless, expressing the view that there would be no action on part of the organisation. Interestingly, when asked to tell the story of the most significant bullying they had witnessed, almost none of the respondents included information about what they did or felt. It was only in the follow-up probing questions that this information was elicited.

Perceived reasons for the bullying behaviours

Witnesses reported seeing people who were targeted due to their being different. One example of this was an individual targeted due to his homosexuality: 'I used to work with a homosexual male. There was a comment made as a joke that offended him a lot so he complained', while another was associated with ageism: 'This time the person who was bullied was an old Australian woman doing admin works [sic] ... They loaded all the work for her to do and their working time was for talking'. In the latter example, the peer-related bullying was from a full-time tenured staff towards a contracted staff member who could not afford to complain for fear of losing her job.

Bystanders also observed that emotions and stress led to bullying behaviours. One individual observed 'colleagues being shouted and sworn at when their supervisor was stressed, angry or upset. This did not have to be based on workplace matters'.

Helping behaviour

The types of helping behaviour reported by respondents including offering support privately through to making a report. Many of the respondents, however, indicated that they did nothing (n = 35). Of the 83 participants (35 (AU), 30 (IN) and 18 (TR)) who responded to the request to further describe their response and explain their action or inaction, 10 (AU), 16 (IN) and 9 (TR) indicated that they took no action. Those who did nothing reported:

> I kept quiet; I was an intern with no authority. And I sat quietly and said nothing because I knew that getting involved wouldn't result in any change. I was also frightened of being picked on as a result of my response.

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Respondents who indicated that they had failed to report bullying behaviour expressed remorse at not doing so: 'I just showed compassion to that person but should have taken some steps further and reported the whole situation to HR' while another indicated that the outcome was 'no change because I did not do enough.'

Those who offered support to the target indicated that they: 'Supported the victim emotionally. And offered support and comfort but didn't do anything else.' But there were also individuals who indicated that they had reported the matter to someone else; examples included:

> Explained the situation to my supervisor; I complained to the other manager; I spoke to the one person and explained my feelings and how uncomfortable I was, and my action was to fill out an incident report which has to be completed by a group of people rather than one person. I did this knowing that it would have to be addressed.

Reporting the matter to managers or those in authority did not always lead to action on the part of the organisation. One respondent indicated that the behaviour about which they were responding was 'widely accepted'. In some cases, respondents indicated that they reported the matter to a manager or to the HR department, but that they were unaware of any action taking place, and that the bullying continued. One individual mentioned that the outcome of their reporting the matter was nothing, 'but I felt better about saying something when no-one was sticking up for me when it was directed at me'. Where there was action on the part of the organisation, this ranged from 'she was given warnings', and 'person was moved and other staff and those involved counselled', to the indication by a participant that the 'man who was making mobbing and illegal operation has been dismissed [*sic*]'.

Personal repercussions were also reported as having been experienced by some respondents: 'I have been transferred to another section on a three-month trial period and have given up my substantive position' and 'My senior insulted me and said that I should never interfere when two people are talking'. Many of those who took no action indicated fear, powerlessness, or organisational tolerance or acceptance of bullying behaviour. These reasons are now further explored.

Silenced by fear

The evidence is that many of the bystanders to workplace bullying in this study identified that they did not speak up. There were indications that this silence was based on fear. Kish-Gephart et al. (2009) have examined the relationship between fear and silence, arguing that employees are both 'biologically prepared to fear challenging authority, but also socialised to do so' (179). Goldberg, Clark and Henley (2011) found voice to be more likely where the bystander identifies with the target so strongly that the risks or costs associated with speaking up are outweighed by the need to speak up. The weighing up of the costs and benefits of speaking up in defence of the target were well understood by targets who knew that there had been witnesses, and

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that their response had been silence. There was evidence, however, that they did not even compare notes with other witnesses, suggesting a greater silence: 'was unsure if others would view the incident as bullying'. Goldberg, Clark and Henley's work suggests that a group of people who perceive workplace injustice are likely to speak up if they collectively agree that an injustice occurred.

Powerlessness

Power was seen as a factor, both as an antecedent of bullying behaviour, and as influencing the reluctance of witnesses to intervene. Comments such as: 'Manager delegating the crap work to the same colleague all the time. We think it is because she knows this girl needs the job' are illustrative of this. When witnesses observed supervisor or manager bullying, they referred to 'A manager harassing the junior'; 'A senior was forcing the junior to do the work assigned to the senior'; 'Junior being thrashed by the seniors on day 1 of his job' and 'A superior misusing his position and power on his subordinates'.

Comments such as 'I was an intern with no authority', and 'I could not respond because I was a trainee and I was scared and humiliated too', as well as, 'We used to discuss only at peer level. Did not take any action as the person was very close to top management' and 'Nothing, they would do nothing' indicated a sense of powerlessness among witnesses. One indicated that a manager to whom an incident was reported 'ignored it . . . and said we should work harder and not make mistakes even though we were already working at full capacity'. Clearly, inaction by the manager was interpreted as a message that the negative behaviour was not taken seriously by the organisation.

The evidence in the data was that bystanders thought no action would be taken even if they did report anything, and those who did make a report included some who were unsurprised by a lack of action on the part of the organisation. Responses such as 'nothing, of course!' illustrated their lack of surprise. A lack of expectation of any action on the part of the organisation and HR staff could lead to a perception of powerlessness which would lead to less reporting. Morrison and Milliken (2000) identified that a climate of silence is created by a belief that there is danger in voicing concerns, but also that speaking up is not worth the effort. Both of these views combine to create a sense of powerlessness among employees, but the latter can stem from a belief that the organisation is accepting of the situation and can potentially be seen to condone the behaviour. MacCurtain et al. (2018) have identified that powerlessness, or relative powerlessness, are factors in inaction by bystanders.

Perceived organisational acceptance or tolerance

Bystanders who took action and reported bullying which they had witnessed were disappointed with the reaction. 'The supervisor just smiled and said "this is a project not a company, the project will end soon"' and 'an investigation was conducted but the staff member concerned was not reprimanded and has now been promoted!' While there was evidence in the data that reporting the behaviour or defending the target could lead to change, there was also a sense that reporting was ineffective. Bystander accounts reinforce

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D'Cruz and Noronha's (2011) findings that organisational indifference and disapproval towards bystander actions makes them feel vulnerable and afraid, limiting the support they wish to provide targets even in the context of friendship. Clearly, as discussed later, there is a role for the HR function here.

A range of outcomes was reported by bystanders who had taken action by reporting the behaviour of the perpetrator(s) either informally or formally. A within-country analysis was not possible as the numbers of responses were limited, but more than a third of responses in each country dataset indicated no action or limited response on the part of the organisation or the perpetrator (Australia 16/33; India 9/23; Turkey 6/15). The mixed responses across the different within-country data suggest that organisational culture may be more influential than the culture or laws of the country in the response of the organisation to reports of workplace bullying; even when reports are made, they can be ineffective in stopping the behaviour.

What is also important about this data is that while almost one-third of the actions seemed to indicate no change resulted from the report being made, a range of other outcomes were also reported. These included negative outcomes such as a backlash for the bystander or the target, and positive outcomes such as changed behaviour on the part of the perpetrator.

Some of the responses indicated action on the part of the organisation but not whether this had led to a change in perpetrator behaviour; respondents did not provide further information. It can also be surmised that respondents who indicated no knowledge of the outcomes of their actions, even when they took action, saw no evidence of changed behaviour from the perpetrator, in effect impacting on their views of the organisational (non-) response. Bystander actions and the outcomes of their actions are represented in Figure 1.

Recruiting bystanders as allies to ameliorate workplace bullying

The willingness of bystanders to assist or intervene in workplace bullying situations represents an opportunity to be harnessed by organisations. HRPs, in particular, who are charged with protecting employee rights and well-being (D'Cruz, Noronha and Beale 2014) have an important role to play in making bystanders potential allies in the amelioration of this negative behaviour. The preliminary evidence in this study offers the opportunity to consider the potential for the work of Bowes-Sperry and O'Leary-Kelly (2005) and McDonald, Charlesworth and Graham (2016) on sexual harassment to be extended to workplace bullying. The elements identified in relation by these researchers investigating sexual harassment were mapped against the evidence from the respondents in the current study (Table 2).

The evidence is that for bystanders to become allies who engage in helping behaviours (Goldberg, Clark and Henley 2011; Podsakoff et al. 2000), they need to identify the behaviour as bullying, determine that action is needed, decide that *they* should take action, determine what action they feel they can take, and then *act*. For these last three, it appears that bystanders would need to feel some responsibility, feel empowered to act, and feel

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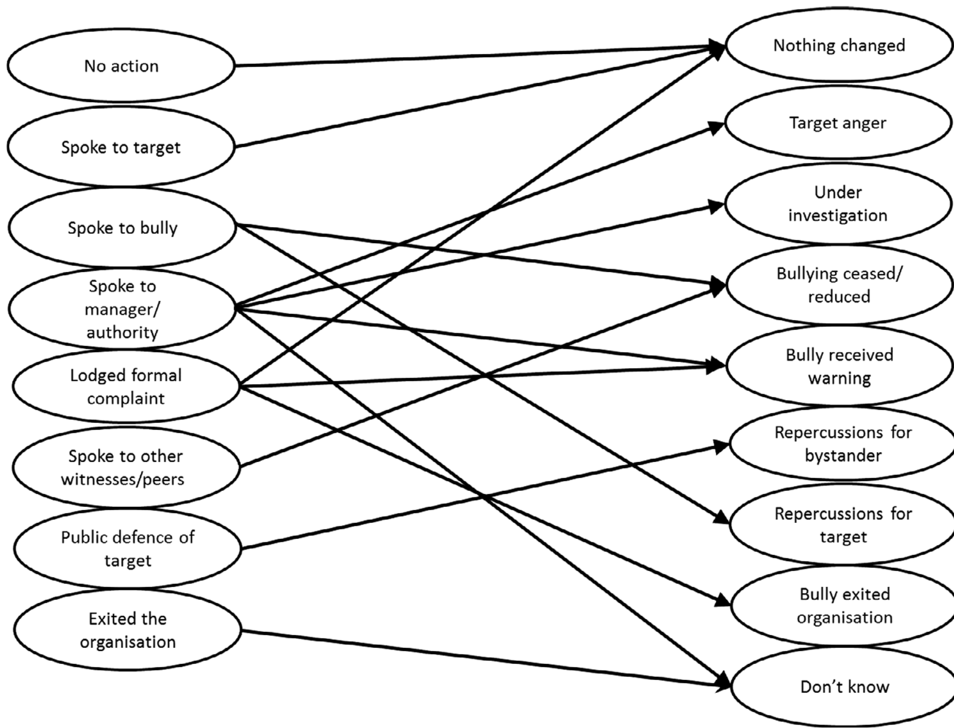

Figure 1 Bystander actions and outcomes

that if they do act it will make a difference. An apparent lack of response by the organisation, especially by the HR office, to reports or evidence of workplace bullying is unlikely to lead to bystanders taking responsibility to act. A perceived punitive organisational response towards bystanders would reinforce the fear that some have that they will suffer a detriment should they take action.

A number of factors may contribute to the lack of response, or perceived lack of response, by the organisation when a report of bullying behaviour is made. These include an organisational culture which is tolerant or accepting of certain behaviours (Samnani and Singh 2012), as well as differing interpretations of behaviours identified as bullying (Omari and Sharma 2016). D'Cruz and Noronha (2010, 2011) indicate the influence of a managerialist ideology within workplaces which renders unitarist HR practices into mere rhetoric, with implications for targets' and bystanders' experiences of the course and outcomes of bullying. D'Cruz (2015) speaks of the relevance of depersonalised bullying where abuse is institutionalised and pervades organisational functioning. It may also be a (dis) trust element (Harrington, Rayner and Warren 2012) which has crept into the HRP or grievance handler's management of bullying complaints whereby the practitioner or grievance handler is caught between conflicting versions of events. Trust in the relationship with the employee is consequently sacrificed in favour of a partnership with the line

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Table 2 Comparison of bystander evidence from this study with sexual harassment findings

Author[a]	Element	Extract of data in support
Sexual harassment literature		'Workplace bullying data'
Bowes-Sperry and O'Leary-Kelly (2005)	Bystanders need to recognise the event or action as requiring action	'Was unsure of if others would view the incident as bullying'
	Identify a personal responsibility to act	'I defended the citizen's rights. I tried to show how unhappy I was due to all this'
	Decide how urgently action is required	'I felt morally obligated to stand up for her while she was away'
	Weigh up the personal cost benefit of action or inaction	'Was not really in a position to take action without losing my job'
McDonald, Charlesworth and Graham (2016)	The degree to which the bystander identifies with the target	'I felt better about saying something when no-one was sticking up for me when it was directed at me'
	Fear of the nature of the likely response anticipated from peers, superiors and others in terms of reprisals or sanctions	'I was also frightened of being picked on as a result of my response'
	And proximity to the event or behaviour	'The bully was my team leader so I didn't feel I had the power to act'
	Where there was 'clear opportunity' to help bystanders were frequently inactive	'[I was there and in a position to speak up but] I could not respond because I was a trainee and I was scared and humiliated too'
	Where there was action it was often 'tentative, temporary, delayed or ineffective'	'I just showed compassion to that person but should have taken some steps further and reported the whole situation to HR' *and* 'Not initially then yes when I left'

[a]These authors cited other authors in the development of their work.

manager. The apparent inaction of the HRP or the grievance handler feeds into the culture of the organisation, thus deterring bystanders, and targets, from action.

Figure 2 offers a recommendation as to the bystander thinking which might be suggested by this study. Policy development, awareness-raising and follow-through by organisations have been demonstrated to lead to a measure of success in developing cultural change in organisations (Johnson 2011); the HR function has a role in all of these. In

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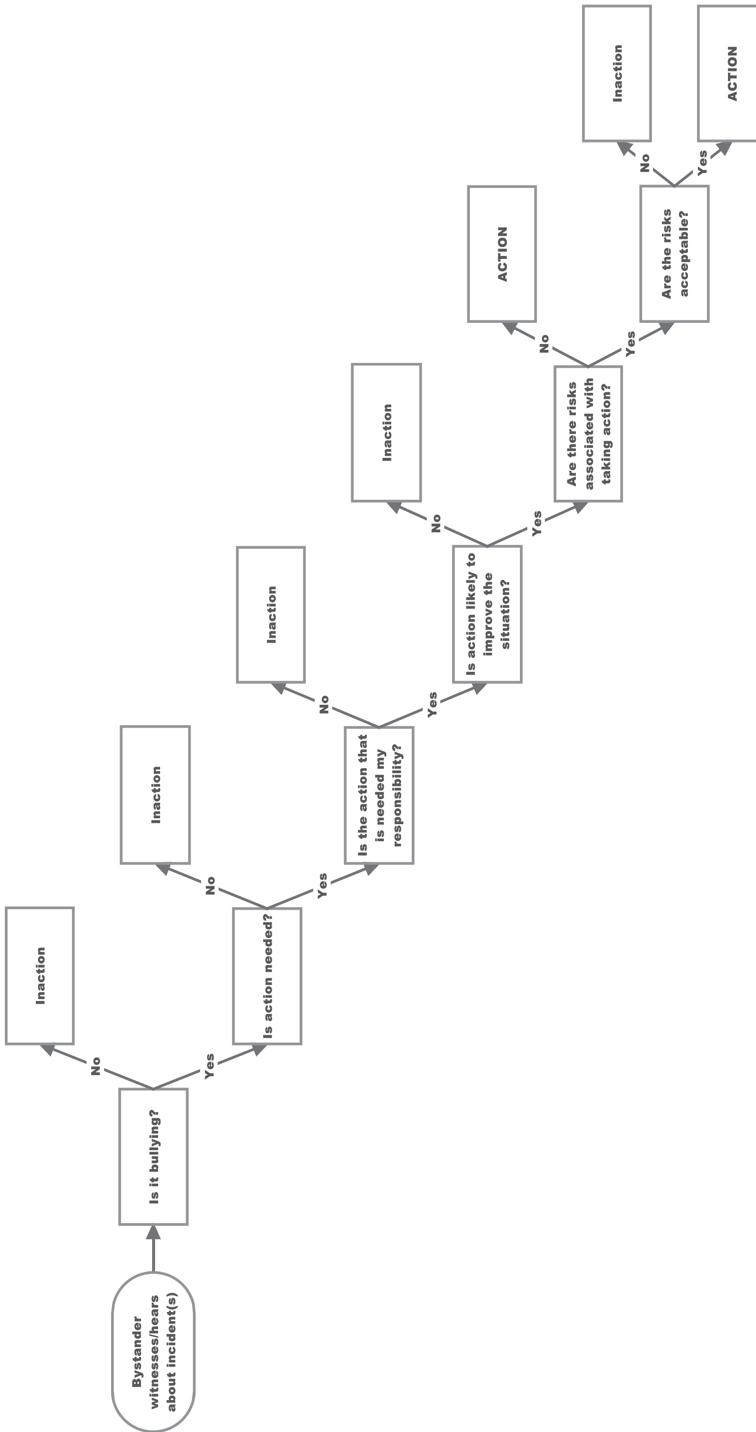

Figure 2 Bystander thinking about action or inaction in instances of workplace bullying

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terms of Figure 2, there are a number of opportunities to influence the choices of bystanders – in awareness-raising about what constitutes bullying, and whose responsibility it is to act, as well as what action can be taken. The response from the organisation, led by the HR department when a report is made, is likely to set the tone and influence future behaviour, as is context specific awareness-raising and training (Bainbridge, Perry and Kulik 2018).

Lutgen-Sandvik, Namie and Namie (2009) and D'Cruz (2015), among others, have identified organisational responses, especially those of HRPs (D'Cruz and Noronha 2010, 2011, 2014) as central to the amelioration of bullying, and this appears to include the recruitment of bystanders to act. MacCurtain et al. (2018, 1) have identified that the support of 'those in power' is essential if bystanders are to be influenced to do more than discuss what they have seen. If bystanders are to be harnessed as potential allies in the amelioration of workplace bullying, a number of elements are needed. These elements include the building of systems, policies and processes, dissemination of these, and then action which demonstrates organisational commitment to follow-through. Initiating and building these are the responsibility of HRPs, albeit in partnership with managers in the organisation. Endeavouring to empower bystanders strengthens HR's position as an employee advocate which privileges care and compassion and ensures employee dignity and interests (D'Cruz, Noronha and Beale 2014).

Implications

In the search for increased understanding of bystander choices and behaviours, this study has extended what is known about their action and inaction. Building on the work of Mulder et al. (2014, 2016, 2017), D'Cruz and Noronha (2011), Cooper-Thomas et al. (2014) and on the typologies of Paull, Omari and Standen (2012) and Linstead (2013), this paper identifies that action or inaction can stem from feelings of fear, powerlessness or lack of faith in the system. Positing these findings against the helping behaviour (Goldberg, Clark and Henley 2011; Mossholder, Richardson and Settoon 2011; Podsakoff et al. 2000), and sexual harassment (Bowes-Sperry and O'Leary-Kelly 2005; McDonald, Charlesworth and Graham 2016) literatures, facilitates a deeper understanding of the factors leading to bystander action and inaction, paving the way for the further development of theory about bystanders in workplace bullying. These findings have practice-related implications especially for HRPs whose roles address optimal organisational functioning (D'Cruz, Noronha and Beale 2014). Emboldening bystanders to take action in the face of workplace bullying is likely to be similar to situations of sexual harassment, and the theory of helping behaviour indicates that this involves imbuing feelings of responsibility, empowerment and capacity to make a difference, as well as diminishing fears of potential personal cost. These are part of building a climate of trust.

A more in-depth comparison between bystander responses to incidents of sexual harassment and workplace bullying is warranted. Such a comparison would enable consideration of the utility of interventions designed to assist and empower bystanders in both situations. Engaging a framework of helping behaviour would deepen insights into

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theory and practice. A further area for investigation is the outcomes reported by bystanders who took action to report bullying, or to speak up on behalf of the target. Organisational practices which demonstrate that positive bystander action to assist a target will not be met with silence, inaction or worse still, retaliation or punishment, are likely to assist in reducing fear or powerlessness while simultaneously being empowering.

Finally, there are varying responses on the part of bystanders to bullying behaviours in the workplace, and these variations can be categorised into certain types. The typologies offered by Linstead (2013) and Paull, Omari and Standen (2012) provide an opportunity to consider those responses. The evidence from the present study is that the action or inaction of bystanders is the product of a range of factors including the context in which the bullying is witnessed; here, HRPs can play a positive role.

HRP action to embolden bystanders

Employee perception of HR policies, procedures and practices in operation in the organisation and the faith of individuals in the organisational response to workplace bullying are only part of the picture in enlisting bystanders to assist in reduction of bullying behaviours. The overall context of workplace interactions and the climate in which incidents occur also play a part. HRPs, however, play a critical role in influencing this context, and consequently, the behaviour of bystanders. Given HR's role in the development of workplace culture and trust in management (Harrington, Rayner and Warren 2012), the emboldenment of bystanders is a tool with great potential for defusing workplace bullying scenarios before they escalate, as well as for identifying unacceptable behaviour by having it reported. It is postulated that this emboldenment can occur at two levels – the first is to encourage a climate in which bystanders feel that they can step in and neutralise negative behaviours without making themselves a target, while the second is to demonstrate that reports are heard and taken seriously. To this end, Demir, Rodwell and Flower's (2013) suggestion that HRPs should ensure that supervisors and managers are appropriately trained to support targets provides an important boost to developing appropriate bystander responses, emphasising the responsibility of all organisational members in addressing workplace bullying (McCormack, Djurkovic and Casimir 2013). Training would need to be tailored to the organisation and the context in which it takes place (Bainbridge, Perry and Kulik 2018).

Developing climate will require both the skill building of employees who are potential bystanders, so that they are equipped to identify and articulate bullying behaviours and then calm escalating situations, as well as building the capacity of individuals to receive feedback when their behaviours may be perceived as bullying, and respond accordingly. This might mean an additional layer added to awareness-raising and skill development beyond that which is present in many organisations whose primary focus in anti-bullying programs is to promote policies and procedures.

Building faith in reporting is likely to be more complex due to the potentially confidential nature of complaints or reports, and of sanctions or penalties. Public naming of targets or alleged perpetrators is more likely to be a deterrent to reporting than an

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incentive, with bystanders not likely to want to be named either. The only way to build trust is by taking actions which lead to changed behaviours; no easy task.

Human resource practitioners have a role in ensuring that individuals selected for supervisory roles are appropriately trained, and it may be beneficial to find a means of monitoring ongoing support. Similarly, fair treatment of employees who work on a part-time/casual bas is should be included in such training.

Conclusion

Based on a thematic analysis of online stories elicited from participants in Australia, India and Turkey, this study has explored factors underlying bystander action and inaction in the context of workplace bullying. Building on the extant understanding of bystander behaviour in workplace bullying and weaving in literature from the fields of sexual harassment and helping behaviour, the study has reinforced Cooper-Thomas et al.'s (2014, 90) position on the importance of bystanders to workplace bullying, and that providing support and guidance and 'clarifying their responsibilities may be crucial'. The study findings show that there are a range of factors likely to influence individual responses to events to which they are a witness, but often their response is inaction. Inaction may be a product of fear, powerlessness or organisational culture, and, similar to the evidence relating to sexual harassment in the workplace, when there is action, it may not be effective. In illustrating the potential ubiquity of bystander inaction and ineffective action, the study emphasises the significance of context in influencing bystander behaviour and, in so doing, identifies possibilities by which HRPs can empower bystanders to take action for and on behalf of targets. Accordingly, constraints on bystander 'helpless helpfulness' and apathy (D'Cruz and Noronha 2011, 276) can be overcome.

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