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The limits to workplace friendship

Managerialist HRM and bystander behaviour in the context of workplace bullying

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper seeks to describe bystander behaviour including bystander decisions, actions and outcomes, in the context of workplace bullying.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper draws on a study rooted in van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology conducted with agents who witnessed workplace bullying in international-facing call centres in Mumbai and Bangalore, India. Conversational interviews and sententious and selective thematic analyses were undertaken to explore participants' lived experiences.

Findings – Participants' experiences were captured by the core theme of "helpless helpfulness" which subsumes the major themes of "the primacy of friendship" and "the ascendance of the self". Friendship prompted participants to completely protect targets and to fully resolve the bullying situation. Yet, participants, whose initial behaviour was in the desired direction, greatly curbed their efforts in response to supervisory reactions and organizational positions. Inclusivist and exclusivist HR strategies adopted by the employer organization constrained participants in their endeavours to support targets.

Research limitations/implications – The study achieves theoretical generalisability but further research is needed to establish statistical generalisability.

Practical implications – Bystander intervention is an important solution to workplace bullying. The study findings help in developing more effective bystander intervention training programmes, apart from advocating the engagement of HRM as a truly unitarist ideology, the development of effective employee redressal mechanisms and the relevance of pluralist approaches and collectivisation endeavours.

Originality/value – Bystander behaviour in the context of workplace bullying has received limited empirical attention. The study breaks new ground in uncovering the contribution of workplace friendship and organizational inclusivist and exclusivist HR strategies to bystander experiences. Further, workplace bullying remains largely unexplored in India.

Keywords Workplace, Human resource management, Bullying, Social interaction, Call centres, India

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Workplace bullying literature largely focuses on targets, with attention to bullies and organisations increasing in the last few years. Bystanders, while being important constituents of the bullying scenario, have received very little research attention in spite of Hoel, Einarsen, Keashly, Zapf and Cooper's (2003) call to study this group. Alternatively referred to as observers or witnesses, bystanders are those individuals who are present during the bullying incident(s) at the workplace. In the context of

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bullying, Twemlow *et al.* (2004) categorise bystanders into "bully bystanders" who become involved in bullying behaviour, "avoidant bystanders" who deny any responsibility for the situation, "victim bystanders" who become victimised in the process of bullying and "helpful" bystanders' who attempt to defuse the situaton. Einarsen and Mikkelsen's (2003) and Hoel, Einarsen and Cooper's (2003) reviews of the British, Norwegian and Finnish literature highlights the impact of workplace bullying on bystanders. Increased stress and lower motivation, job satisfaction, commitment, efficiency and productivity, as a result of observing bullying, anticipating being targeted and being/feeling unable to help targets, were reported. Clearly, bullying has a ripple effect that works to the detriment of the individual and the organisation (Hoel, Einarsen and Cooper, 2003).

Contemporary research focusing on this group, though very limited, is pronounced by its applied emphasis whereby bystanders are viewed as a critical part of the solution to workplace bullying. Mulder *et al.*'s (2008) and Mulder *et al.*'s (2010) work explores the determinants of bystanders' helping behaviour with a view to harnessing such behaviour for target support. Using Weiner's social conduct model, their study found that bystanders' perceived target responsibility for the bullying situation increased anger and lowered sympathy, reducing helping intentions. Yet where power differentials between targets and bystanders instilled fear into the latter, perceived target responsibility resulted in stronger helping intentions, when sympathy and anger were controlled. Moreover, the perceived threat of social contagion precipitated fear in bystanders, thereby diminishing their helping orientation. That the organisation context contributes to bystanders' behaviour cannot be denied.

Van Heugten's (2010) research on targets revealed complex relationships between targets, bullies and bystanders, highlighting three types of bystander profiles which include allies of the bully, passive bystanders whose stand indicates that incivility is acceptable and hesitant supporters. Her findings showed that previously silent bystanders begin to support targets when the latter decide to resign. Van Heugten considers this to indicate bystanders' potential to act as change agents and suggests bystander training programmes that capitalise on this to lower tolerance for workplace bullying.

Paull *et al.* (2010) whose research examined bystander roles and actions propose that employee education in relation to workplace bullying should include their roles as potential bystanders, focusing on helping them to recognise bullying, alerting them to their role in legitimising bullying and informing them of their roles in relation to targets and bullies while also protecting themselves.

Rayner and Bowes-Sperry's (2008) work remains the most applied in focus so far. Influenced by the school bullying literature that underscores the critical role of bystanders in perpetuating or reducing bullying, Rayner and Bowes-Sperry (2008) advocate bystander training to encourage bystanders to intervene and to equip them with the requisite skills to do so. Rayner and Bowes-Sperry (2008) draw on existing work in school bullying, workplace sexual harassment and bystander intervention to develop a viable training programme but they also highlight the importance of a congruent organisation culture to ensure the effectiveness of the programme.

In spite of the current emphasis on bystander intervention as a solution to workplace bullying, bystanders as an important group in the bullying scenario need to be better understood. Drawing on the social psychology literature, the relevance of the

"bystander effect" (Latane and Darley, 1968, 1970) and its related explanations of diffusion of responsibility, audience inhibition, social influence and pluralistic ignorance (Davey-Attlee and Rayner, 2007) need to be explored. Drawing on the workplace bullying literature, the role of organisational factors such as organisational structure and functioning, leadership and management and workgroup dynamics (Hoel and Salin, 2003) warrants attention. More specifically, the nature of bystander behaviour and the complex mosaic of factors – personal, social, organisational and temporal, to mention a few – that determine bystander behaviour in the context of workplace bullying are important areas to be studied. Insights gained from answers to these questions would enhance the robustness of applied endeavours such as bystander intervention training.

This paper, which seeks to address the aforementioned gaps, explores the experiences of agents who witnessed interpersonal bullying in India's international-facing call centres. The findings highlight how bystander behaviour is affected by target-bystander friendship and organisational inclusivist and exclusivist HR (human resource) strategies.

Method

In the course of a phenomenological study seeking to understand the subjective work experiences of international-facing call centre agents in Mumbai and Bangalore, India, where the core theme of being professional (Noronha and D'Cruz, 2009) and major theme of an oppressive work environment (D'Cruz and Noronha, 2009) were identified, ten participants reported having been bullied. Further research was conducted to understand the experiences of this group of targets of workplace bullying (D'Cruz and Noronha, 2010) and of bystanders/witnesses/observers of targets' experiences. The experiences of the latter group, namely the bystanders/witnesses/observers, are presented in this paper.

Of the ten targets of bullying referred to above, eight agreed to put us in touch with people who had observed/witnessed the situation and all the latter agreed to participate in the study ($n = 17$). Bystanders' (also referred to as participants henceforth) experiences were studied via van Manen's (1998) hermeneutic phenomenology, which seeks to grasp the essence of participants' experiences as they are lived. Following van Manen's (1998) approach, the conversational interview was used to gather experiential narrative material. All interviews, held as per the convenience of the participant, were conducted in English and were recorded on audio-cassette with the permission of the participant. Data recorded on the audio-cassette were later transcribed verbatim by the research staff. Informed consent, voluntary participation and confidentiality marked the ethical protocol of the inquiry.

Of the 17 bystanders/participants (11 women and six men) included in the study, 11 were located in Mumbai and six were based in Bangalore. Participants' ages ranged between 21-27 years. In all instances except three, participants were in dyads or triads of friends who knew each other and the target closely in the pre-bullying phase. In one case, a target and a participant were romantically involved. In the other three instances, a friendship in the initial stages got cemented due to the bullying experience (group 4) while two other friendships were initiated and developed successfully when a team mate observed the bullying situation and reached out to the target (group 6) and a

dyad observed a team member being bullied and reached out to her (group 2). All participants worked at the agent level in different international-facing call centres. Each group worked in the same organisation, with group members either belonging to the same team and/or to the same business process that had similar shifts or worked on the same call floor (see Table I). Participants in the study, therefore, were not merely bystanders/observers/witnesses but were also friends of the target. This relational connection played a critical role in their responses to and experiences of the target's bullying experience. None of the participants belonged to any union.

Readers may note that Table I has sociodemographic details of targets and that the term "target" is used in the paper to refer to this set of people.

Thematic analyses following van Manen (1998) was undertaken. Through the sententious approach, each transcript was read as a whole to capture the core/essential meaning of participants' experiences. Through the selective approach, major themes and 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 core theme, were identified and demarcated.

Prior to the presenting the core theme and its related major themes and themes, targets' experiences of bullying and redressal are described to set the context for the findings.

Targets' experiences of bullying and redressal

Targets and participants worked in India's international-facing call centres where SLAs (service level agreements) between employers and offshore clients created oppressive work environments which privileged technobureaucratic controls and performance measures. This hard HRM (human resource management) model was couched in soft terms through employer claims of concern for employee well-being operationalised via the notion of professionalism. While employers described employee redressal opportunities (among other organisational processes) as proof of their commitment to professionalism and employee interests, they also cultivated a professional identity in employees which led the latter to prioritise work over personal needs such that compliance and optimal performance were emphasised and the organisation's agenda was furthered. Moreover, employer espousal of professionalism and employee well-being precluded agents' engagement with collectivisation attempts which were seen as redundant. These workplace dynamics, entailing the engagement of inclusivist and exclusivist HR strategies and of socioideological controls (see D'Cruz and Noronha, 2009; Noronha and D'Cruz, 2009 for details), had important implications for targets' bullying and redressal experiences and participants' bystander experiences

Targets' experiences of bullying spanned four phases (details of targets' experiences are available in D'Cruz and Noronha (2010) and are only summarised below). Phase 1 was described as one of experiencing confusion. Targets maintained that it was only in retrospect that they were able to identify when their team leader (TL) began bullying them. During the initial onset period, being immersed in their work, they did not realise that they were being bullied. While the persistence of the bully's behaviour caused them to notice it, they attributed it to the oppressive work environment. Responding to it professionally, in keeping with their internalised professional identity, participants stepped up their performance. In their view, the bully had no reason to victimise them, given that there was no conflict between them

Group	Target	Gender	Age (years)	Location	Bystander	Gender	Age (years)	History of friendship between target and bystanders	Formal workplace relationship between target and bystanders	Outcomes for bystanders
1	1	Woman	21	Mumbai	1.1	Woman	22	Bystanders 1.1 and 1.2 and the target met at work and became friends in the pre-bullying phase	Bystanders 1.1 and 1.2 and the target were in the same team	Bystanders 1.1 and 1.2 left the organization at the same time as the target
					1.2	Woman	23			
2	2	Woman	25	Mumbai	2.1	Woman	23	Bystanders 2.1 and 2.2 had become friends at work in the pre-bullying phase and reached out to the target after the onset of bullying when the former realized that the latter was being bullied	Bystanders 2.1 and 2.2 and the target were in the same team	
					2.2	Woman	22			
3	3	Woman	23	Mumbai	3.1	Woman	23	Bystanders 3.1 and 3.2 and the target were friends from college days	Bystander 3.1 and the target were in the same team. Bystander 3.2 was in another team – all belonged to the same business process with similar shifts and on the same call floor	Bystander 3.1 left the organization with the target
					3.2	Man	24			
4	4	Woman	22	Bangalore	4.1	Woman	26	Bystanders 4.2 and 4.3 and the target were friends from college days. Bystander 4.1 became a part of the group at the workplace – in the pre-bullying phase, she was more on the periphery of the group but, during the bullying phase, she reached out to and hence became an integral part of the group	Target and bystander 4.1 were in one team while bystanders 4.2 and 4.3 were in one team – all belonged to the same business process working on the same call floor and their shift timings were the same	Bystander 4.1 left the organization sometime after the target
					4.2	Man	21			
					4.3	Woman	22			

(*continued*)

Table I.
Sociodemographic details of targets and bystanders

Table I.

Group	Target	Gender	Age (years)	Location	Bystander	Gender	Age (years)	History of friendship between target and bystanders	Formal workplace relationship between target and bystanders	Outcomes for bystanders
5	5	Woman	24	Bangalore	5.1 5.2	Woman Woman	22 23	Bystanders 5.1 and 5.2 and the target met at work and became friends in the pre-bullying phase	Bystanders 5.1 and 5.2 and the target were in the same team	Bystanders 5.1 and 5.2 left the organization at the same time as the target
6	6	Man	22	Bangalore	6.1	Man	24	Bystander 6.1 reached out to the target when he realized that the latter was being bullied	Bystander 6.1 and the target were in the same team	Bystander 6.1 left the organization sometime after the target
7	7	Man	23	Mumbai	7.1 7.2	Man Woman	27 21	Bystander 7.1 and the target met at work and became friends in the pre-bullying phase. Bystander 7.2 and the target met at work and got romantically involved in the pre-bullying phase	Bystanders 7.1 and 7.2 and the target were in the same team	Bystander 7.2 left the organization at the same time as the target
8	8	Man	24	Mumbai	8.1 8.2 8.3	Man Man Woman	23 24 24	Bystanders 8.1 and 8.2 and the target met at work and became friends in the pre-bullying phase. Bystander 8.3 was the wife of the target's childhood friend	Target and bystander 8.1 were in one team while bystanders 8.2 and 8.3 were in one team. All belonged to the same business process and had similar shifts and worked on the same call floor	Bystanders 8.1 and 8.2 left the organization some time after the target

and their performance was outstanding. Moreover, they did not believe that there was room for any irrational behaviour in a professional environment.

Yet, over time, the continuation of the bully's behaviour made it hard for targets to ignore the situation. Based on careful observations and discussions with their intra-organisational and extra-organisational support systems, clarity emerged, resulting in the situation being labeled as "bullying".

Targets described a range of bullying behaviours including isolation, personal attacks, verbal threats and task-related difficulties. Some targets highlighted how bullies, 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 would spread false rumours and allegations about them to various colleagues at the workplace. For a few targets, over time, exclusion from colleagues formed part of the bullying process.

Targets believed that their experiences were at odds with the employer organisations' espousal of professionalism. Moreover, as per the latters' exhortations, there were always intra-organisational avenues to redress their grievances. Targets therefore approached the HR (human resource) department. This marked phase 2 where targets engaged organisational options.

During the initial interactions with the HR department, targets were reassured that their problem would be sorted out. But targets observed over time that the HR department neither reverted to them nor intervened in the situation. Actively following up with the HR department resulted in targets' further victimisation. HR managers would express disbelief at targets' experiences and blamed targets for the situation, insinuating either that the target had done something wrong to invite such behaviour from his/her superior(s) and/or that the target was unable to cope and adjust. HR managers would also point out to targets that their assessment of their situation was wrong given the professional orientation of the organisation and the thrust on employee well-being. Targets' professionalism and commitment were questioned.

Few targets reported that during a couple of meetings with the senior HR manager, the bullies were called in. Tacit as well as obvious support between HR managers and bullies were discerned by the target. Over time, the collusion between HR and the bullies created a situation whereby the target was known as a trouble maker, a maladjusted individual, a difficult person, a misfit and a burden to the organisation. Consequently, co-workers did not wish to associate with the target for fear of being victimised. Not surprisingly, targets felt extremely isolated at work.

After four-to-six weeks of their repeated interactions with the HR department, targets felt that they were going around in circles and recognised that the absence of extra-organisational third-party intervention such as legal mechanisms or employee unions/associations, as per their knowledge, left them completely alone in their quest for justice.

Targets' experiences towards the later part of phase 2 resulted in severe emotional strain, causing them to withdraw into themselves. Moving inwards, phase 3 of targets' experiences, was a period of meaninglessness, confusion and uncertainty during which targets were unable to relate to the world around them and struggled to make sense of the new order of things. Notwithstanding their withdrawn and introspective demeanour, targets' social support networks rallied around them making them feel loved and valued and serving as a link of continuity and stability.

As targets grappled with their experiences, they realised that there were alternative ways in which the situation could be reviewed. They began to look at the options available to them and realised that moving to another organisation was the best alternative. That the booming job market in India's offshoring-outsourcing sector (of which international-facing call centres form a part) provided them with a flood of alternatives without compromising their financial position and career interests, played a critical role in influencing their decision.

Following their decision to exit the organisation, all targets were able to move to new jobs, largely in keeping with their preferences such that their long-term career interests were protected.

After their exit from the bullying situation, three targets heard about UNITES (Union for ITES (Information Technology Enabled Services) Professionals), an association that represents employee interests in India's offshoring-outsourcing sector. That there were extra-organisational avenues to help them fight injustice made targets feel stronger.

Findings

The core theme of "helpless helpfulness" captures the complexity of bystanders'/participants' attempts to support targets, including temporal and contextual dimensions. Friendship prompted participants to completely protect targets and to fully resolve the bullying situation. Yet, participants, whose initial behaviour was in the desired direction, greatly curbed their efforts in response to supervisory reactions and organisational positions. Inclusivist and exclusivist HR strategies adopted by the employer organisation constrained participants in their endeavours to support targets. Participants experienced regret over their limited effectiveness and struggled with confusion, guilt and remorse. Major themes include "the primacy of friendship" characterised by "going all out", followed by "the ascendance of the self" where "holding back" was emphasised.

This section describes the major themes and themes that make up the core theme (see Table II for a list of major themes and themes that constitute the core theme). Vignettes from participants' narratives are included to illustrate the themes.

The primacy of friendship: going all out

Noticing the problem. Participants and targets were close friends, spending considerable time together at the workplace (as workload permitted) and beyond. It was to participants that targets first turned to when the latter realised that there was something amiss. Equally important, participants also independently noticed the bully's behaviour a little before or around the same time that the target did.

Table II.
Core theme, major themes and themes

Helpless helpfulness	
The primacy of friendship (going all out)	The ascendance of the self (holding back)
Noticing the problem	Facing negative consequences
Responding to targets' observations	Taking stock
Making sense of the situation jointly	Adopting a covert stand
Providing support	Limiting support
Approaching bullies and/or HR managers	Appreciating targets
	Coming to terms

Where participants noticed the bully's behaviour prior to the targets realizing it, two sets of responses were observed. While some participants said nothing to targets, others tangentially/indirectly brought it up with targets to get a sense of whether the latter had made similar observations. All participants shared it with other friends in the group and together each group of participants became both more vigilant in order to ascertain the bully's behaviour and more protective of the target.

A few participants reported gently reprimanding the bully for his behaviour (all bullies in this study were men), using a cautious and indirect and sometimes humorous manner. They felt that through their comments, the bully may perhaps become aware of his behaviour and curb it while simultaneously realizing that others in the workplace were observing what he was doing:

> [Another bystander in the group] noticed it and told me about it. I realised it was true. We would try to be around her [target] as much as possible. Sometimes, I would jokingly ask him [bully] if he thought she was deaf or tell him that his voice was getting louder while ours were getting more hoarse with calls. Of course, we said nothing to her (Bystander 4.1).

Responding to targets' observations. When targets told participants their suspicions, the latter group's responses varied. Some participants told targets that they had also found the bully's behaviour peculiar but were not completely sure whether their observations were correct and whether the problem was essentially with the bully. Participants admitted that while they needed to be 100 per cent sure, they also used the uncertainty argument as a means of trying to reassure, or at least not prematurely alarm, the target. They believed that they were supporting the target while also trying to get more time to be sure of the situation and to think of how to handle it:

> We told her that we had similar suspicions but maybe we were wrong so better to observe more carefully. That way, we got some time without upsetting her (Bystander 3.2).

Other participants tried to tone down the target's fears though they found it difficult to do so because they had also had similar observations, and more importantly, they did not want the target to feel that they were belittling/negating his/her experiences. Various explanations were used to calm the target's suspicions including work pressures, the bully's nature, the bully's performance measures and the target's superior performance resulting in greater expectations:

> How to calm her fears without disturbing her more? I told her that he [bully] must be jealous of her performance, that's why he is behaving like that. What else to say? She should not feel upset with the situation but she should not feel alone also (Bystander 2.2).

Making sense of the situation jointly. Once targets had shared their observations with participants, an inter-subjective sensemaking process spontaneously began. Both participants and targets remained very vigilant about the bully's behaviour in order to ascertain with certainty what was actually happening. Targets would then turn to participants to share and make sense of their observations, looking for both interpretations and support. Participants, on their part, would not spontaneously broach the topic with targets as they did not wish to alarm them but would provide constant covert support while also actively responding to the target when he/she required.

Participants' responses to the target took the forms of validating the latter's observations and experiences as well as providing strength, comfort, encouragement

and hope. Participants revealed that though they wished they could deny the reality of what was happening, they knew from their own independent observations that it was true and there was no value in ignoring what was real. Moreover, glossing over the bullying situation amounted to doubting targets' observations and experiences which would have only compounded the latter's distress (even if the intention was otherwise). Further, recognizing the problem was the only way to do something about it. Participants shared that they concurred with targets' observations and thereby helped in identifying the problem:

> Finally we had to admit to each other what was happening. No point denying because that would have caused more problems – she would have felt very disturbed, situation would have gone on (Bystander 5.2).

From the time participants made their independent observations of targets' experiences, they became protective of the latter. This was stepped up when targets shared their observations and even more so when participants and targets jointly defined the situation as one of bullying.

Participants' support for the target was indisputable and unequivocal. Emotional support was predominant. Emphasizing situational attributions, highlighting the limits of the bully's behaviour and reassuring targets of their constant support, participants rallied around targets:

> It was important for her to know that we were there, looking out for her. She was not alone. We made sure she understood that she could count on us any time (Bystander 4.3).

> He [target] is a great agent – his performance is tops. So I always reminded him of this, that it was not something lacking in him or any fault of his but the TL's [who was the bully] own complexes that were behind all this. He [TL] must have been jealous or felt threatened but how far could he go – I mean, could he victimise the whole team? It had to stop somewhere. So this helped comfort him [target] (Bystander 8.2).

Advice constituted another important component, circling primarily around how targets should refrain from providing cues, especially non-verbal ones, that would let bullies know how they were getting affected by the situation. Maintaining an enigmatic expression and deferring reactions was emphasised:

> Her face is totally transparent. One comment from him [bully] and her expression crumbles. So we told her to be a sphinx, expressionless, unreadable – keep him guessing and spill it out with us later (Bystander 4.2).

Participants demonstrated overt support for targets on the call floor. Remaining very vigilant, participants kept an eye on the bully's behaviour and on targets' reactions. The moment participants observed the bully's behaviour during the shift, they would non-verbally but overtly connect with the target to provide reassurance. Between calls, during breaks and before/after the shift as well as during the work-related commute, they would openly demonstrate sensitivity and concern. If the bully's behaviour was displayed during these times in participants' presence, some participants would pass gentle/indirect reprimands/comments:

> Every time, he [bully] attacked her, we would show her a thumbs-up sign or shake our heads. A couple of times when he yelled out at her in front of me, I jokingly said, "Hey, she's not deaf! You can say that softly" (Bystander 2.2).

During these times, participants tried not to leave targets alone as that they felt that their presence both deterred the bully's behaviour and provided courage to targets:

> We decided that at least one of us should be with her at all times between calls, breaks, like that. She would feel better and he would think twice [. . .] But he didn't always [think twice] (Bystander 1.1).

Approaching bullies and/or HR managers

Handling the situation proactively was also discussed. Approaching the bully directly, working through the team and taking up the matter with the business project/process or operations managers were identified as the courses of action by different groups at various points in time. Yet uncertainty about the appropriateness of these options and their possible outcomes stalled implementing them immediately. Participants reported having repeated and sometimes heated discussions within their groups.

In four groups, at some point in time, one or more members "stumbled" upon the professional character of the organisation and this "insight" clinched their decision that speaking directly to the bully was the appropriate action:

> We used to discuss what to do. Very often, we used to talk about it. Then one day, out of the blue, [participant] said, "But we are professionals, this is a professional place, so we can talk straight to [bully] and solve the problem". It was a real eye-opening moment for all of us. We thought we found the solution. We thought why didn't this strike us earlier. We were quite elated that day (Bystander 7.2).

While four targets spoke directly to their TLs, in two instances, they were accompanied by participants (groups 1 and 4). While in the group 1, the two participants remained largely silent as the bully and the target discussed the matter, in group 4, the target was accompanied by bystander 4.1, a slightly older woman, who participated actively in the discussion:

> See, these people are all youngsters. Being older, I should help them. Even the TL [who was the bully] needs some guidance because he is young. So I tried to reason with him (Bystander 4.1).

Targets' decision to engage organisation redressal options emerged from group discussions. In the course of discussions on ways of resolving the situation, the employer organisation's commitment to employee well-being and professional orientation was cited by some targets and participants as a contradiction to the ongoing bullying. As this spurred further ideas of employee interests, participants realised that organisations had numerous avenues to protect employee interests. Going by organisation's stated commitment to employee well-being, participants considered organisation redressal mechanisms to be appropriate grievance handling avenues for targets:

> We had been told time and again that the organisation is there for us, it cares for us [. . .] It was a mantra [. . .] whatever your problem, we will solve it. So this situation seemed to fit right in (Bystander 8.3).

In six instances (groups 1, 2, 3, 4, 7 and 8), participants accompanied targets on their first visit to the HR (human resource) department. Following the first visit, in the subsequent three months, participants in all eight cases frequently accompanied

targets on their follow-up visits to the HR department. In most cases, participants remained aside while targets interacted with HR managers, though in a few cases, participants were present during the interaction and sometimes even spoke up on targets' behalf:

> One of us generally went with her to the HR department. Initially, it was because we had no idea of the people or the procedures. Later, it was more so that she would feel comfortable. Because the situation had become difficult by then, so being with her was important. But we never met them (HR managers) directly – it would have not given a good impression. Like they would think she's weak or it is unprofessional and it would have worsened things. We felt good that we went with her but it was always that we should do more (Bystander 2.1).

The ascendance of the self: holding back

Facing negative consequences. Participants' overt support for and close proximity to the target at the workplace invited the ire of the TL and most participants reported hostility coming their way too. Only two participants who were in a slightly older age group did not experience hostility. Age deterred TLs from being openly affrontive, though the latter's displeasure was apparent here too:

> He [TL] became very rough with the three of us also, finding fault for no reason, passing comments. With me, because I am a little older than him, he was a little careful [. . .] not that he hid his displeasure but not so in-your-face (Bystander 4.1).

Not surprisingly, in all these instances, TLs' negative reactions would translate into vindictiveness, spilling over into performance measures and causing participants to retreat and limit their support to covert and subtle forms. All participants recognised the TLs' relevance in their continuity with the organisation:

> He began to take it out on us. Because he has the power. So he can manipulate our performance charts, mark us down. And that means the end for us. We saw that happening and we became careful. His plan worked (Bystander 7.2).

The apathetic response from the HR department over three months led targets and participants to decide that active and regular follow-up was required to ensure that things got moving. As before, participants often accompanied targets to meet HR managers, though only a few would be present during the actual interaction. Nonetheless, being seen with the target invited disapproval from HR personnel. Though disapproval was communicated mainly via non-verbal means, verbal reprimands were reported by a few participants:

> Once when I was waiting for him, the junior HR told me, "Why are you here? Don't waste your time." That told me that they had noticed me (Bystander 8.1).

Taking stock. Going by the organisational response as described above, participants realised that being associated with the target was putting them in a difficult position. That is, their link with the target was being interpreted as an anti-management and anti-organisation position whereby their commitment was being called into question and the security of their employment was becoming shaky. Moreover, based on targets' experiences, participants understood that employees had no recourse. Superiors and managers were all powerful, leaving employees with no options. The absence of unions in the sector, as per participants' knowledge, provided employees with no alternatives.

This brought home to participants the rhetoric within organisational exhortations and their own vulnerability and helplessness. Participants realised that organisations basically sought compliance and commitment by making employees toe the line and no dissent was tolerated. Professionalism and employee well-being operated within this framework and did not actually take care of employee interests or embrace employee rights, ethical practices and moral correctness but were professed as means of gaining employee obedience:

> All of us are in a precarious position. Because company is only concerned with SLAs and revenues – they care for us about that only. So any problem means you are alone. And if no superior wants to help you, your team members also cannot. There are no options. If friends help, they can be kicked out of the job. So employee well-being, professionalism – all this is humbug (Bystander 6.1).

Adopting a covert stand. All participants reported that the aforementioned realisation caused them to censor their overt support to targets at the workplace. Thus, while they continued to support the target, they no longer did this in an observable and upfront manner. Participants reported that this change took place naturally and automatically, without any conscious decision. They attributed it to their self-protection instinct, heightened under the difficult circumstances. Consequently, while participants' concern for and assistance towards targets remained constant, its manifestation was muted at the workplace. Outside the office, participants did not limit themselves but went all out as they had done earlier. Participants reported being overcome by helplessness at this point in time:

> When I think back, it happened naturally, automatically. I just withdrew in a way – held back, stayed far. I guess I was so afraid of being victimised that keeping a low profile seemed the right thing to do. Of course, I was there for her but mostly outside the office. I felt completely helpless at that point. I wanted to protect her but that put me in the problem. So what to do? All roads were closed (Bystander 5.1).

Reflecting on the situation, participants realised in hindsight that their helplessness arose from a perceived lack of choice. That is, at the point of time, they felt they had no other option but to limit their overt association with the target. But looking back, they admit that they actually had a choice, albeit a tough one. That is, on the one hand, they could have continued to overtly support the target and advocate his/her interests though this meant inviting victimisation and risking their own employment, while on the other hand, they could take care of themselves though this involved letting down their friend and compromising their values.

Participants acknowledge that, at some level in their consciousness, they must have been aware that they had choices and yet a pre-eminent and pervasive sense of helplessness had led them to unconsciously privilege one choice over the other. In their view, this subconscious awareness probably accounts for the emotional turmoil they went through during this time. That is, while participants saved themselves from crippling consequences, they could not escape the numerous misgivings that accompanied their actions. Their own interests constantly jostled against their concern for the target and their ethical and moral positions. Guilt and remorse that they had betrayed their friends and their principles haunted them, even up to the point of data collection:

> We were always disturbed at that time, we were not doing enough, we had left her alone. Yet what could we do? But now sometimes I feel we could have done something – take the consequences. But at that time, we thought differently. Actually, we were too scared, so we didn't think only. But we were troubled (Bystander 1.2).

Limiting support. Undoubtedly, censoring their behaviour circumscribed the nature and extent of support participants could provide targets with at the workplace. Thus, before, during and after the shift, when they were on the call floor, participants took care to display a distance from the target so as to indicate dissociation from the latter and hence the communication of support was non-verbal and surreptitious. Participants continued to spend breaks with the target but these were usually in the cafetaria or the recreation room where bullies and HR personnel were unlikely to come. Participants neither reprimanded bullies for their behaviour nor accompanied targets to the HR department. Not surprisingly, participants saw their help contextualised within the boundaries of their helplessness and acknowledged its limited effectiveness in really helping the target:

> I did my best for him but I knew that that was just not good enough (Bystander, 7.1).

Participants harboured these sentiments even though beyond the call floor, their support remained unaltered.

Appreciating targets. Participants revealed that targets realised the formers' vulnerability at about the same time as they themselves did. Targets were quick to emphasise that participants should not be drawn into the bullying situation and face their predicament. Most targets themselves suggested that participants stay away from them during the shift so as not to invite the bullies' anger. That targets cautioned them to take care of themselves and not invite victimisation while not holding any grudges against them for their limited support was deeply appreciated. Participants admired that targets could think beyond themselves in spite of their own crisis situation:

> She was more concerned about us. It makes me feel small. Here, we were darpoks [scared people] and she didn't hold it against us but worried about us (Bystander 1.2).

Participants spoke of targets' appreciation for their support, even when it was limited. While targets' magnanimity and sensitivity made participants feel ashamed of their behaviour at the workplace, their sense of shame did not cross the threshold required to change their behaviour to the earlier levels of support. Instead, participants attempted to compensate through their support beyond office hours, though this did not assuage their remorse completely:

> She always would say, "At least, you people are there with me." Because no one in the team cared. So though we could do nothing for her but she was grateful to us always. What we could not in the office, we tried to do outside. Of course, it was not enough (Bystander 3.1).

Coming to terms. Overall, the experience affected participants' physical and mental health. Apart from witnessing the victimisation of and its effects on a friend, being helpless and unable to intervene and ameliorate the situation precipitated turmoil. Participants remained emotionally disturbed which included feelings of sadness, anger, guilt and fear, sometimes manifest through insomnia, headaches, loss of

appetite, fatigue and other physical complaints such as influenza, gastrointestinal problems, etc.

All participants reported being preoccupied with the fact that they had let their friend and themselves down:

> I put myself first, that is how I see it. That helped no one, not her, not me. Because it let down everything I stood for [. . .] friendship, justice, integrity (Bystander 5.1).

While they continued to support the target as best as they could, a sense of guilt and a loss of face were reported. Targets' understanding, which was greatly appreciated and admired, added to participants' misgivings:

> I found it difficult to face him at times [. . .] you know, to look at him in the eye. Because I was not really helping him out. I guess we would go overboard (in supporting the target) outside the office to make up for what we should have actually done (to help him) (Bystander 8.1).

Participants grappled with their behaviour, wondering whether they had done the right thing and whether they could have done things differently. Their thoughts were inundated with questions and doubts and working-through entailed seeking answers. Though participants were looking for answers to still their misgivings, these were not easy to come by. According to them, this was because while they knew where the truth lay, they still had to come to terms with their actions:

> I was filled with questions then. The answer was in front of me. But I could not deliver. So the doubts continued. I would tell myself that I did the best I could. But I was still troubled. I feel that way even now (Bystander 7.1).

Vacillation in the working-through process was apparent. Yet, though a sense of vindication could be discerned, the overriding sentiment that came through for all participants was that of guilt and remorse which they attempted to overcome through various rationalisations which brought them hope:

> I still feel horrible about it. Then I became very down. So I till myself that past is past, I should have done more but I did not – but I can do so in future. Then I feel better. I tell myself it was a learning experience for me and next time I will be strong, stand up for my beliefs (Bystander 6.1).

Four participants said that they wished to quit the employer organisation during phase 2 of targets' experiences (engaging organisational options) when they realised how hopeless the situation was. But doing so meant leaving the target alone and hence they chose to remain in the organisation as long as the target did.

Participants' motivation, job satisfaction and organisational commitment suffered tremendously. Nonetheless, they strove to maintain their performance in order to ensure the continuity of their tenure and to maintain their career prospects.

Where targets and participants belonged to the same team, participants described the behaviour of the team mates. Recalling a variety of reactions, participants divided team members into friends of the target and/or of participants and peers. Participants specified that in the case of friends, they became aware of the TL's behaviour either through their own observations, through the target's/participants' observation or through the inter-subjective sensemaking process if they participated in this. Participants observed that these friends began to distance themselves from the target and from participants at various stages – either once there was clarity that the target

was being victimised and associations with him/her would have adverse effects or after the target began actively pursuing the issue with the HR department and the matter became more public. These friends essentially avoided the target and participants, with a few of them occasionally showing indifferent/lukewarm/superficial concern that did not hold any genuineness. In some instances, these friends asked participants whether they felt it was wise for them to be associated with the target and a few friends even admonished participants to steer clear of the target. Participants highlighted that some of these friends went out of their way to show the TL that they were not connected with the target but were aligned with him.

Peers within the team displayed indifference throughout. In participants' views, peers were definitely in the know of things by the middle of phase 2 when matters were quite public. To what extent they were aware of the issue prior to that could not be ascertained. But they continued to remain aloof and indifferent except in one instance where a peer began to show some concern towards the target (group 4). All other peers took care to be in the TL's good books and stayed away from the target. These people were aware that participants were helping the target beyond the call floor and maintained a distance from them too, indicating their position mainly non-verbally.

In three instances (groups 4, 7, 8), participants spoke of their attempts to round up friends to handle the situation jointly once the situation had been identified as that of bullying. Participants believed that their coming together would be an important first step in effectively handling the problem but their friends, picking up the TL's displeasure at their association with the target, retreated and moved away from the situation.

Participants believed that team members' reactions stemmed essentially from self-interest and from fear of facing difficult consequences if they were associated with the target. While participants understood their team members' position, they acknowledged that this lack of support contributed to their helplessness and to the limited efficacy of their attempts to help the target. In their view, proactive support from team mates would have helped them continue "going all out" rather than "holding back":

> You cannot blame them. But then if we all come together, then HR has to take notice, right? It didn't happen and two of us alone were too weak (Bystander 7.1).

Participants' perceptions of the employer organisation were altered such that six participants decided to quit the organisation along with the target while three quit soon after the target left. All these nine participants felt that they could no longer continue with the organisation after this experience. The other eight participants who remained with the employer organisation indicated uncertainty about their continuity here. While better career prospects within this or another organisation was the key deciding factor for this group, several participants stated that they knew from their friends and peers in other international-facing call centres that the situation was no different there.

Discussion

Through its findings, the study has addressed gaps in our understanding of bystander behaviour in the context of workplace bullying. The study shows the relevance of both the target-bystander-bully relationship and the nature of organisational functioning in influencing bystander decisions, actions and outcomes. Indeed, participants' behaviour arose due to friendship but was limited by managerialist HRM which privileged inclusivist and exclusivist HR strategies.

Participants and targets were all close friends, apart from being colleagues. Unlike bystander research in social psychology where strangers and simulated experimental designs are involved, in bullying research, the workplace serves as the real context and hence the backdrop of this context and of workplace relationships in influencing bystander behaviour cannot be ignored but provide a different dimension to the phenomenon. In contrast to the "bystander effect" (Latane and Darley, 1968, 1970) which implicates diffusion of responsibility, audience inhibition, social influence and pluralistic ignorance (Davey-Attlee and Rayner, 2007), friendship prompted participants to go all out to help targets. Workplace friendship constitutes a unique workplace relationship in that it is voluntary and personalistic (Sias and Cahill, 1998), blending the co-worker and friend roles and blurring the boundaries between public work role and private personal realm (Marks, 1994). Going beyond mere role occupancy, workplace friendships embrace the whole person and entail depth and intimacy, serving as a source of intrinsic reward, information and support (Sias and Cahill, 1998). Workplace friendships develop and flourish in all types of organisations, at all hierarchical levels and between all types of employees (Sias, 2009). While workplace friendships facilitate information exchange, influence organisational change endeavours and provide links to sources of power and influence, their social support function remains their key defining feature (Sias, 2009). It is precisely this latter role that stands out in the study findings, with participants' support forming a "holding environment" (Kahn, 2001) for targets. Indeed, while most friendships in the study preceded the onset of bullying, in three instances, friendship resulted from or grew closer because of the observation of bullying, strengthening Sias and Jablin's (1995) argument that work-related problems draw co-workers together. While workplace friendship has the potential to influence organisational functioning (Sias, 2009), the present study findings did not evidence this. Participants' behaviour neither complicated nor confronted organisational functioning, instead being largely overshadowed by it. Participants' support operated within these constraints. Thus, when participants' attempts to be helpful bystanders (Twemlow *et al.*, 2004) put them in the position of victim bystanders (Twemlow *et al.*, 2004), they censored their support and became avoidant bystanders at the workplace. Yet, participants' inability to effect change and to resolve targets' problems did not result in workplace friendship deterioration (Sias, 2006). That targets did not harbour conflicting expectations or interpret participants' behaviour as betrayal (Sias *et al.*, 2004) was the critical factor here.

While the present study has furthered our understanding of bystanders who are friends of targets, understanding and comparing bystander experiences across a range of workplace relationships including superiors-subordinates, peers and co-workers, and romantic partners is an important research agenda. Juxtaposing each of these relationship categories with Twemlow *et al.*'s (2004) classification of bully bystanders, avoidant bystanders, victim bystanders and helpful bystanders will add to the insights.

Participants' experiences underscore 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 and 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 and Rayner, 2003). It was precisely this dimension of organisational functioning that was responsible for participants' trajectory from helpful bystanders to victim and then avoidant

bystanders at work (Twemlow *et al.*, 2004) and for other team mates' apathetic responses to the situation which nullified few participants' attempts at co-worker mobilisation. Indeed, the espousal of inclusivist and exclusivist HR strategies creates a situation where HRM operates as one-sided managerialism which privileges employer organisations' interests rather than as true unitarism which engages employers and employees together in the employment relationship (Lewis and Rayner, 2003). As our findings show, 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, employees as stakeholders are 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 and justice (Lewis and Rayner, 2003). Under such circumstances, it is not surprising that bystanders resort to indifference which legitimises bullying (Paull *et al.*, 2010) and indicates that incivility is acceptable (van Heugten, 2010).

Ironically, Ironside and Seifert (2003) and Hoel and Beale (2006) assert that solutions to workplace bullying essentially lie in pluralist approaches through collectivisation endeavours. Bullying is less likely to occur and is more likely to be tackled when it does occur if there is a strong and well-organised trade union presence at the workplace (Ironside and Seifert, 2003). Similarly, Mulder *et al.* (2008), Paull *et al.* (2010), Rayner and Bowes-Sperry (2008) and van Heugten (2010) maintain that bystander intervention holds the promise of being the most effective remedy for workplace bullying. While intervention efforts so far largely focus on targets and bullies, with limited success, bystander intervention makes bullying everyone's problem, holding each individual accountable for the behaviours around them. Apart from de-escalating conflict situations, bystander intervention creates supportive work environments that demonstrate zero-tolerance of interpersonal abuse (Davey-Attlee and Rayner, 2007). Workplace friendships and other peer relationships are the practical starting point for these endeavours. While collectivisation endeavours initiated from outside the organisation have the potential to succeed if they can capture the organisational membership, bystander intervention training and workplace relationships, especially friendships, can aid them in bringing employees together. Paradoxically, bystander intervention training will work only in a conducive organisational context (Mulder *et al.*, 2008; Rayner and Bowes-Sperry, 2008), and while its effectiveness could make collectivisation endeavours in workplace bullying redundant, they could strengthen collectivisation attempts in general by providing employees an extra-organisational voice option and by mobilizing the workforce.

To conclude, the study findings also throw light on bystander decision-making. Drawing on the social psychology (Latané and Darley, 1970) and sexual harassment (Bowes-Sperry and O'Leary-Kelly, 2005) literatures, we see that participants immediately and proactively respond to the bullying situation, considering it their personal responsibility to help their friends. But the high costs of involvement, arising from organisational factors, cause them to retreat and withhold their support at the workplace while continuing to experience severe emotional turmoil because of their inaction.

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