Bullying in global organizations: A reference point perspective

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Abstract

Why does bullying occur in an organization? How will the globalization of an organization facilitate the process and encourage bullying to occur in that organization? What can be done to reduce the level/impact of bullying in an organization that is in transition? These are the focal questions addressed in this paper. Reference Point Theory (RPT) is applied to the bullying phenomena in an effort to illustrate the various reference points that can be used by the bully, the bullied, ‘others’ in the global organizations, as well as the management of the organization. The divergent reference points used by individuals in the organization can encourage bullying to occur and make attempts to reduce the resulting conflict much more difficult to implement. The paper develops a process to reduce the level of bullying during the transition to global organization and to limit the impact of bullying events that do occur in the organization.

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1. Introduction

Bullying (i.e., repeated acts directed at an individual or others in an organization that are unwanted interactions by the victim which cause humiliation, offence, and stress and therefore, can impact job performance and create a dysfunctional work environment) is becoming a major problem for global organizations (Einarsen & Raknes, 1997). There have been a number of studies of the bullying phenomena in a variety of different countries (e.g., Demark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Ireland, England, Korea, Japan, Germany, Italy, Australia, New Zealand, Mexico, United States and other countries) indicating the pervasiveness of the bullying in the workplace (Bird, Taylor, & Beechler, 1998; Bird & Beechler, 1999; Field, 2003; Hogh & Dofradottir, 2001; Quine, 1999; Sparks, Faragher, & Cooper, 2001; Vartia, 2001). As organizations globalize their operations, the workplace can become conducive to bullying activity. Several conditions inherent in global organizations provide fertile ground for bullying to occur.

The rate of change in global organizations is unprecedented and it is likely that the evolution of formal organization and control systems will occur more slowly than the changes in the global environment. This procedural lag increases the likelihood of abusive behaviors occurring because the policies and procedures necessary to control for abusive behavior have not fully developed. This pattern of change will result in unstructured, fluid situations for managers (Hamel & Prahalad, 1994; Hitt, Keats, & DeMarie, 1998).

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This lack of formal organizational control systems given the rapid expansion will provide ‘rogue’ managers with the opportunity to mistreat employees if they so choose. Indeed, it is common for aberrant behavior to occur during radical change, which may go undetected given the rate/amount of change taking place (Aquino, 2000; Aquino & Bradfield, 2000; Aquino, Grover, Bradfield, & Allen, 1999; Luzio-Lockett, 1995). The time necessary to develop formal control systems could provide the opportunity to managers to bully others in the organization.

Another factor influencing the potential mistreatment of employees within global organizations stems from the increased diversity in global organizations. Managers are attempting to integrate home country, host country, and third country nationals into a coherent management team (Ghoshal & Bartlett, 1997; Hamel & Prahalad, 1994; Harvey & Novicevic, 2001; Nohria & Ghoshal, 1997). Underlying this increased level of diversity are greater cultural, social, and religious differences potentially heightening the tensions among various groups in the organization (Crawford, 1999; Triandis, 1994, 1995, 1996).

In addition, there might be a significant level of time asynchrony between the home country and operating units in the global marketplace due to the time differences and the level of geographic dispersion (Illitch, Lewin, & D’Aveni, 1998; Kefales, 1998). This time/geography disconnect can potentially go undetected for longer periods permitting abusive supervision to occur (Tepper, Duffy, & Shaw, 2001). In addition, the level of supervision may be affected due to the need to reduce cost and the lack of managers qualified to undertake global assignments. The combination of disperse operations and lack of management creates the opportunity for local managers to take advantage of the situation and bully employees.

Finally, the challenges mentioned above are compounded when the global management team lacks experience with the conditions that can encourage bullying behavior to escalate (Harvey & Novicevic, 1999; McGill & Slocum, 1993; Slocum, 1997). The level of competencies of managers is often less than that found in domestic, or one where managers are familiar with the societal and organizational norms of acceptable behavior. What constitutes abusive behavior will vary from country to country and culture to culture (Bond, 2004). Behaviors that may be deemed acceptable in one cultural context may be considered unacceptable in another. For example, in Western societies the direct contact between men and women is a normal part of the business culture. While expatriate managers working in the Middle East who attempt to have the same level of familiarity with females will be deemed as culturally unacceptable and it intimidates the female employees. This increases the level of ambiguity for managers attempting to control dysfunctional bullying activities in global organizations. While the Civil Rights Act of 1991 requires U.S. organizations operating abroad must comply with Title VII provisions of the Act, ambiguity relative to bullying activities can arise.

Given the pressure, tension, and resulting conflict in global organizations, these environments appear to present conditions for bullying to occur (Einarsen, 1999; Einarsen & Raknes, 1997). Bullying behavior in a work environment is generally thought of as manifesting itself in one of five ways: (1) name calling by a bully of a victim in public (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Avrell, 1983); (2) scapegoat failure on a stigmatized individual or group in the organization (Mikula, Petr, & Tanzer, 1990; Robinson & Bennett, 1997); (3) increased work pressure to perform on an individual as well as a group beyond the level of expectations of other employees in the organization (Robinson & O’Leary-Kelly, 1996; Youngs, 1986); (4) sexual harassment of co-workers generally by individuals with a power differential (Baron & Neuman, 1996; Bies & Tripp, 1998; Terpstra & Baker, 1991; Tata, 1993); and (5) physical abuse or harm to a stigmatized individual or group (Brodsky, 1976; Einarsen, 1999). Bullying behavior creates stress and apprehension, and thus effects the motivation, commitment, mental health, and performance of the individual that is the victim of the bullying (Bird & Beechler, 1995; Niedl, 1995; Sheehan, 1999; Tepper et al., 2001; Wilson, 1991; Zapf, Kornz, & Kulla, 1996).

Unfortunately, scholars have not, to date, offered such a framework. To address this oversight, this paper introduces Reference Point Theory (RPT) as a basis for understanding and addressing bullying behavior in global organizations. Toward accomplishing this objective, RPT is explored to determine its applicability to bullying behavior in global organizations. In addition, we develop a model of bullying behavior to demonstrate the various aspects of bullying that need to be examined when attempting to address this dysfunctional behavior.

2. Reference point theory and its application to the global bullying phenomena

RPT has its roots in the strategic management literature (Fiegenbaum, Hart, & Schendell, 1996). The foundation of RPT is that managers will develop reference points that they can use in making decisions
and these reference points provide the rationale for making difficult decisions. To be effective, a manager’s decision-making must ‘fit’ the environment and the resources that are to be committed relative to the potential risk associated with the decision.

Managers can use the strategic actions of other global organizations as guidelines for their own decisions. From this perspective, there are three basic reference points. First, managers can choose global organizations that have lower standards or norms than the focal organization as referent points (i.e., the organization being compared to does not maintain as high a decision-making standard as the focal organization) (Andrews, 1978). These global organizations are frequently referred to as disassociative global organizations, or global organizations that the focal organization does not want to emulate. Second, decision-makers may look to global organizations that have the same level of risk taking in their decision-making and have similar risk profiles as the focal organization (i.e., peer/sister’ organizational risk profiles) for insight in how to act in a given situation. A final referent point alternative is found in global organizations that take higher levels of risk and are willing to gamble with their resources beyond the present strategies of the focal organization. These ‘referent’ global organizations could have higher returns than other global organizations but potentially have greater risk associated with their strategies (Fiegenbaum et al., 1996). The case being that organizations that are willing to take greater risks would expect to have higher returns than more conservative counterparts.

The risk profile of management or individual managers could be cast as lower, higher, or at the same level as other managers. Global managers have a number of referent points. We suggest that there are four general anchor referents that can be used to make decisions relative to bullying activities in global organizations, they are: (1) individuals (i.e., employees, managers, and managers from other global organizations); (2) groups both within the organization (i.e., management teams, functional teams, top management teams) as well as outside the organization (i.e., trade groups, government regulators, non-interacting third party global organizations like the UN or International Monetary Fund monitoring bodies); (3) global organizations that are disassociative, sister, or referent global organizations relative to their decision-making on bullying behavior in the organization; and (4) societal frame-of-reference as to what is acceptable behavior relative to bullying in one country relative to another country that the global organization may be doing business in at any one point in time.

As previously suggested, global managers must consider the time orientation of the cultures within which they operate. The reference point selected may have a different time perspective (i.e., past, present, or future). The interaction of referent point and time perspective of the referent point for each decision can be illustrated by applying the RPT to bullying in global organizations. Taken together, anchor referents and time perspective can be integrated to construct a frame-of-reference for making decisions relative to bullying in global organizations (see Table 1). In other words, the global manager’s time perspective may color his/her decision on bullying based upon the time frame selected to assess the risks associated with bullying in the global organization. For example, the global manager may use his/her past experiences in the organization to frame the bullying act in a global context. The time orientation may provide the manager with an effective reference point. If the environment in which the decision is being made has remained static and is comparable to the environment in the past in which the manager is referencing for the present bullying decision then the reference points could remain constant. Whereas, the global manager could attempt to anticipate what is the

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appropriate decision on bullying activities in a new environmental context in the future shifting his/her reference point perspective to take into consideration the dynamic nature of the global environment and its impact on the manager’s decision.

The conclusion that can be drawn from this is that global managers are both risk-averse and risk-taking, depending on whether the decision-makers perceive themselves to be in a domain of gains or losses relative to the bullying behavior in the organization (Fiegenbaum et al., 1996). It has been argued that the top management level decision-makers become internal reference points in evaluating the conduciveness and tolerance of bullying in a specific global organizational context (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). The question becomes how and which reference points will the managers use when they are making decisions relative to bullying in the global decision domain. This is not to assume that these managers’ decisions are random. These are temporally influenced by changes in the internal organizational culture, the increased knowledge of other global organizations tolerance of bullying at a point in time, as well as the exact point-of-reference they use in their decisions.

RPT helps to define the decision-making process relative to the risks associated with bullying in global organizations. Given the rapid changes taking place and the lack of past experience (i.e., an adequate/appropriate decision frame-of-reference) in the global environment, global managers will test and retest their reference points relative to bullying decisions. To gain additional insight into how RPT may be used as a means to structure global managers’ decision-making, a model of bullying is being presented that can be used to derive formal research propositions. The following section of the paper illustrates such a model.

3. A reference point model of bullying in global organizations

The bullying phenomenon is a complex, multifaceted problem for global managers. Whereas, we previously argued that RPT can be used to explain management’s responses to bullying in global organizations, RPT can also be extended to understand the manner in which bullying activity is perpetuated in global organizations. To this point, Fig. 1 illustrates a model of global bullying based upon RPT. We argue that there are two general forces that shape bullying behavior; dynamic reference points and the macro-external environment surrounding the bully. The following section discusses each of the elements and extends research propositions that could be used to test the validity of the global bullying model.

Fig. 1. A reference point model of bullying behavior in global organizations.
3.1. Dynamic reference points

The first set of issues that affects the propensity to engage in bullying behavior relate to the various referent points that are applied to the bullying context. Specifically, each of the potential participants associated with a bullying event could have different points of reference relative to the act and the resolution of the bully attempt. Reflecting on the previous discussion of the role of referent choice and time perspective (Table 1), the important issue is that each party could have a different time perspective as well as a different point of reference creating conflict amongst those involved in the bully event.

The bully’s frame-of-reference is influenced by past bullying activities, particular those in which the bully was ‘successful’. The bully develops a self-efficacy of bullying and uses these successes as a foundation for undertaking future acts of bullying. The similarity of context is generally a concern that influences the bully’s behavior relative to past environments where bullying acts where undertaken. In addition, the assessment of the ‘weakness’ of the person to be bullied is also evaluated by the bully to determine areas of vulnerability and overall susceptibility of the potential victim. The key is the bully’s assessment of the situation/potential victim is predicated on past experience (Luzio-Lockett, 1995). Therefore, the time orientation will be the past, although it could come into conflict with the present if the environment is different or has changed since the bully’s last act.

The frame-of-reference of the potential victim (e.g., bullied individual) may rest on the past experiences of the individual and present environmental context. Those that have experienced bullying in the past will be aware of the conditions that will allow the dysfunctional act to occur once again. The ‘victim profile’ might encourage bullies to target these individuals, particularly if it is well known that the individuals were bullied in the past. The past experiences become the foundation for future expectations of the bullied individual and provide the psychological opportunity for the bully to exercise his/her will over the bullied individual. The profile of bullied individuals becomes known in the organization and lowers their social standing and results in a lower level of self-esteem (Crawford, 1999).

The bullying frame-of-reference for the ‘others’ in the organization will primarily be seated in the present as they are observers of the profile of the bully as well as his/her bullying activities (Coyne, Seigne, & Randall, 2000). The ‘others’ in the organization assess the context which allows the bullying to take place and are keen observers of what corrective action (if any) is taken by management. The tenure of the ‘others’ in the organization may be short enough not to have built expectations relative to bullying. Nonetheless, they will use the bully event to frame their future expectations. This is of particular importance when the ‘others’ are foreign employees who do not have experience with the organization or with the culture from which the organization represents (Bond, 2004). In addition, ‘others’ bring a frame-of-reference with them from previous global organizations or cultural environments in which they have worked. Thus, the present orientation may be in conflict with the past orientation with respect to the act of bullying or of the bully in particular.

Management’s reference points for bullying in the global organization have the foundation of the present standard operating procedures with attention being given to the future, recognizing the dynamic flux of the organization. The intention of managers will be to control bullying to help insure modifying standards as the organization moves into a global context. The cultural/social norms being different and the level of autonomy given to managers necessitate updating bullying standards almost on a continuous basis. Therefore, conflict can arise between the time perspective as well as the reference point between managers, bullies, the bullied (victim), as well as ‘others’ who observe the bullying event. In addition, each of the individuals may adjust their point of reference based on the fluid nature of the organizational and its environment (i.e., my existing frame-of-reference is not adequate for making a judgment on this behavior given my limited experience in this environment).

(I) Bullying example: Child labor and the mistreatment of vulnerable workers in emerging countries: ‘Sweat shops’ in emerging countries have been identified as utilizing children as a primary workforce to contain labor costs to meet global competition. The poor working conditions and mistreatment of this category of vulnerable workers (i.e., high risk of injury and physical abuse) have been recognized as a basic violation of the human rights of a society. Yet, these sweat shops continue to exist and in some countries their existence is ‘defended’ (i.e., by plant owners and in some cases customers who benefit from the use of children as laborers) due to the inadequacies of the formal education infrastructure and the profound need of the family for income. Nevertheless, the inhuman working conditions and the risk to health and mental development (e.g., education) make the abuse of children in the
workplace as a classic form of bullying a vulnerable
group of workers. These bullied individuals do not
possess an adequate frame-of-reference to make a
reasoned judgment as to the quality of their working
conditions or the ‘fairness’ of their treatment.

These observations lead to the following research
propositions relative to bullying in an organization:

**Proposition 1.** Each individual in a bullying event has
a unique reference point that is used to assess the
bullying activity.

**Proposition 2.** To the degree that there is greater
diversity represented in the external environment and
organizational cultures, there will be a larger number of
reference points that can be used by global managers to
assess bullying behavior.

### 3.2. The global context in which bullying takes place

#### 3.2.1. Macro-external environment

The external macro-environment of a host country
can the global vary from that of the home country
along several dimensions. First, the level of ‘novelty’
or distance (e.g., both cultural and economic) of the
host country from that of the home country can be
dramatic. This impacts the definition of what
constitutes bullying activities. Second, cultural values
of a society where the bullying act occurs may provide
the societal level of tolerance of bullying and to a
degree remedies for the bully (e.g., societal norms and
local legal remedies for bullying/harassment in the
workplace) are accepted (Bond, 2004). Indeed, these
cultural mores provide the foundation for the global
organizations policies relative to the potential incivi-
lity in the organization.

Within the macro-environment, there can be a
multitude of subcultures that can also have an impact
on the perception of bullying activities. An increase in
diversity in the macro-culture will result in an increase
in the likelihood of having a divergent set of cultural
perspectives on bullying in the workplace (Bond, 2004).
For example, in subcultures that are matriarchal in
orientation (e.g., Spain, many Africa cultures), the
concept of bullying will be less accepted than in a more
patrarchal (e.g., countries of the mid-east), male
dominated environment. In addition, cultures that are
more collective in their orientation should be less
tolerant of bullying behavior. The group norms would
not allow bullying to disrupt the cohesiveness of the
group (Bond, 2004; Triandis, 1994). As a generalized
example of this issue, in individualistic cultures (e.g.,
United States) the individual takes a more idiosyncratic
orientation to behavior and is less likely to be protective
of others in the group (Triandis, 1995).

Cultural syndromes (e.g., shared attitudes, beliefs,
norms, and values among a society) found in countries
provide the basic architecture for behavior in groups/
global organizations. Some examples of cultural
syndromes are: (1) cultural complexity—generally
related to the size of a society; (2) cultural tight-
ness—tight societies have many rules, norms, and
prescriptions of ‘correct’ behavior; (3) active versus
passive cultures—active cultures attempt to change the
environment to fit them, while passive cultures change
themselves to meet the society; and of particular interest
(Bond, 2004); (4) universalism versus particularism—
universalist cultures treat others on the basis of
universal criteria (e.g., all competent people are
acceptable regardless of race, sex, age, etc.) whereas,
in particularist cultures people treat based on who the
other person is (i.e., social standing, family, or are
known to be associated with some particular group)
(Triandis, 1994, 1996). Therefore, cultural syndromes
can directly influence the tolerance of a society has for
bullying behavior. These could be useful in identifying a
given culture as more susceptible to bullying acts (i.e.,
East Asian societies being susceptible to this acceptance
of bullying acts, at the risk of being a gross general-
ization when compared to Western societies) (Bond,
2004).

#### 3.2.2. Internal organizational culture

The culture of an organization can also have a direct
impact on the environment of bullying both from its
initiation as well as to the longevity of the activity in the
organization (Kotter & Heskett, 1992). An organiza-
tion’s culture is the definition of reality as far as the
organization is concerned and is reflected in the
organization’s: (1) standard operating procedures
(SOPs); (2) norms of behavior; (3) rules of conduct;
(4) values held as being important; (5) symbols and
totems in the organization representing things of value
and importance; (6) taboos both symbolic as well as real;
(7) heroes or key personalities that define the nature of the
organization; and (8) the daily climate or civility with in
the organization (Schein, 1992, 1999). Incivility in the
organization can be accentuated when global organiza-
tions enter distant cultural environments as well as when
attempting to assimilate greater levels of diversity into
their organization (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Peck,
2002). Potentially, the greater the number of reference
Organizational cultures are generally categorized into three groups: (1) role cultures—very formalized, rule and/or process oriented cultures where acceptable as well as unacceptable behavior is prescribed; (2) task cultures—as a foundation the organization has a strong sense of the basic mission of the organization and the team is the fundamental common denominator of the organizational culture; and (3) power culture—the organizational culture is based on the hierarchical distribution of power which controls rewards/sanctions. Depending on the basis for the corporate culture, one can gain insights into the tolerance for bullying behavior. Moreover, given the likely amalgamation of cultures when global organizations expand overseas (e.g., joint ventures, strategic alliances, acquisitions, and the like) the resulting differences or gaps in the cultural fabric can provide ideal opportunities for bullying behaviors to exist (Hofstede, 1994).

It has been theorized that there are four factors that stimulate bullying behavior in a work environment, those being: (1) deficiencies in work design—lack or improper supervision or in the conditions in which individuals are required to work (i.e., physical environments conducive to allowing bullying to occur such as isolated areas) or the actual process of completing the work (i.e., lack of supervision); (2) deficiencies in leadership behavior—inadequate supervision or lack of training of supervisors/managers on how to address bullying behavior observed in the workplace or about appropriate behavior with peers, and subordinates and the potential consequences of their bullying behavior; (3) a socially exposed position of the victim—fellow employee weaknesses or weaknesses in management processes are known to the bully and are acted upon take advantage of these social inequities in the work environment such as conditions suffered by undocumented workers and the ‘power/influence’ that can be abused by managers/supervisors given the employee’s peerless legal position and inability to complain; (4) low morale standard in the organization—the culture and climate within the organization has, over time, learned to accept substandard treatment. Therefore, bullying is not only tolerated but expected (i.e., demoralization similar to prisoners of war who in some cases learn to ‘accept’ bullying as a normative behavior by their captors) (Einarsen, 1999; Leymann, 1993; Morrill, 1992).

### 3.3. Individual differences in the characteristics of the bully

There appear to be three leading biological ‘causes’ of aggressive bullying behavior in a workplace context: (1) brain related issues—the frontal lobes of the brain are thought to influence self-control, maturity, judgment, tactfulness, reasoning, and aggression. The prefrontal cortex uptake of glucose (i.e., the fuel for the brain) is significantly lower for antisocial aggressive individuals (Raine, Buchsbaum, Lottenberg, Abel, & Stoddard, 1994); (2) mutation of specific genes—researchers have discovered in impulsive, aggressive males a mutation in genes that codes for an enzyme, monoamine oxidase A (MAOA). This gene metabolizes the brain chemicals serotonin, dopamine and norepinephrine. If the gene malfunctions and does not metabolize the appropriate amount of these chemicals, high levels of aggression and antisocial (e.g., bullying) behavior can occur (Cases, 1995). It is also thought that genotypes can moderate children’s sensitivity to environmental stress and insults that might lead to antisocial bullying on their part in group settings (Caspi et al., 2002); and (3) overly developed immune system—researchers have found that aggressive behavior is associated with a strong immune system with aggression-immunity association strongest for CD4 cells and B lymphocytes (Granger, Booth, & Johnson, 2000).

There are a number of social conditions that can stimulate and encourage bullying behavior in the workplace. Bullying may be an imitation of aggression experienced at home (Haynie et al., 2001). This role model ‘mimicking’ can manifest itself in business environments where employees observe managers being abusive to other employees (Tepper et al., 2001; Zellars, Tepper, & Duffy, 2002), exhibiting tyrannical/uncivil behavior toward one another (Ashforth, 1994), or through overt bullying of others in the organization (Hoel, Rayner, & Cooper, 1999; Rayner & Cooper, 1997; Zapf, 1999). Given childhood experiences, employees may be predisposed to bullying regardless of what behaviors they observe in the workplace (Segal, 1994). However, the combination of the innate and social contexts would appear to encourage overt bullying behavior on the part of adults in a work environment (Espelage, Bosworth, & Simons, 2004).

(II) Bullying example: The loss of a major contract due to ‘inadequate’ performance of inpatriated managers: A major engineering contract on the construction of a hydroelectric dam in an emerging country (e.g., China) was lost by a global company...
headedquarter in a Western country. The inpatriate managers from the emerging country were given the responsibility of developing the specification for the dam in the engineers’ home country. The inpatriate managers were singled-out as the primary reason for the loss of the contract and were verbally criticized on a number of occasions publicly for not doing enough to procure the contract (e.g., they were thought to have the contacts in the host country to help insure that the contract would be granted to the company). The residual negative attitude toward the inpatriate managers made it difficult for them to succeed in the headquarter organization. Therefore, in a very short period of time the entire team of inpatriate engineers either quit their jobs or relocated back to their home country. The public admonishment (i.e., on-going public reprimands by the top management) was a cultural affront to the inpatriates and became the basic rationale for them leaving the company after the company had invested millions of dollars in their inpatriation program. Being an inpatriated manager made them vulnerable to the strong Western organization culture and placed them at a disadvantage due to the lack of organizational support/protection. The lack of understanding of the impact the criticism would have on the inpatriate managers was a form of system wide bullying that encouraged others to join in criticizing the inpatriated engineers.

The innate characteristics of bullies, social conditions conducive to allowing bullying behavior to occur, and not being sanctioned lead to the following research propositions:

Proposition 3. Employees and managers with individual differences that predispose them to bullying should not be assigned to positions with high role and/or task ambiguity.

Proposition 4. Biodata can be used to determine abnormal childhood experiences of potentially heightening the probability of bullying activity if selected for a global assignment.

Proposition 5. Deficiencies in work design, leadership, lack of adequate organizational protection and lower morale in a global organization will lead to higher levels of bullying activity.

3.4. Impact of ‘observers’

Those that witness or know of the bullying activities taking place in organizations can play an important role in ‘extinguishing’ or ‘encouraging’ this dysfunctional activity. Key to distinguishing the posture that observers may adopt is the power they possess within the organizational. A proactive stance by individuals is less likely to occur when they do not have the power to control or authority to sanction the bully and when their acts may draw attention to themselves as potential targets of bullying in the future (i.e., aggressive, dominating social behaviors can affect his/her vulnerability to the bully’s future actions if the bully cannot be confined; Aquino & Byron, 2002).

Bullying activities can encourage acquiescence from third parties in the organization. The form that occurs most frequently is that of the ‘spiral of silence’ (Jeffres, Neundorf, & Atkin, 1999; Moy, Domke, & Stamm, 2001; Perry & Gonzenbach, 2000; Turner & Sparrow, 1997). As developed by Noelle-Neumann’s (1974), the ‘spiral of silence’ is the ‘commonwealth (i.e., shared beliefs of groups and to a lesser extent global organizations) is held together by prevailing views, habits, and prescribed behavior; from which none can deviate without running the risk of being ostracized’ (Noelle-Neumann, 1989, p. 6). Employees/managers are willing to ignore what they know is ‘wrong’ for fear they will be isolated from the group or that support from the group will be withdrawn (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). The act of withholding judgment by an ‘observer’ on a bullying event takes place when there must be a significant emotional component to the bullying activity. The fear perceived by the ‘observers’ does not have to be accurate relative to the retaliation of the bully. In fact, the power comes from the misperception of the ‘observer’ which is commonly referred to as ‘pluralistic ignorance’ (i.e., withholding personal opinion in order to mimic or support the wider held group/organizational position on an issue).

Pluralistic ignorance was a social phenomenon identified in the 1920s (Allport, 1924) and reflects a situation where people operate within a false individual inference about the state of the social environment in which they work (Fields & Schuman, 1976). Pluralistic ignorance can occur when an ‘observer’ of bullying has a different opinion from the organization-adopted position but nevertheless adheres to the organization-adopted norms (e.g., ignoring bullying behavior). The ‘observer’ wrongfully infers that other members’ private opinions are congruent with the organization’s. This phenomenon has emerged to the point where “virtually every member of a group or organization privately rejects a belief, opinion, or practice, yet believes that virtually every other member privately accepts it” (Prentice & Miller, 1993, p. 161).
(III) Bullying example: Not knowing what to expect and having a different cultural reference point than the one being utilized by expatriate managers: Coworkers observed a host country national being admonished by an expatriate manager for not completing their job in a specified time. The host country national did not follow a prescribed length of time to eat lunch but followed the more traditional cultural based ‘extended’ lunch break found in the host country. The standard used by the expatriate manager was based upon his/her experience in the headquarters of the global organization and not the local standards. Those that observed the ‘calling-out’ internalized this implicit standard established on the headquarters expectations. The resulting interaction with other employees created a work environment that was marked with conflict and reduced productivity due to the perceived bullying activities of managers. The cultural mores (e.g., having a more flexible time orientation to the mid-day meal) where not being observed by expatriate managers in the organization and the resulting behavior of the host country nationals reflected their dissatisfaction with the new concept of time relative to their mid-day meal. Bullying goes beyond cultural differences in that the bully uses the cultural difference(s) as a justification to harass and subject the local individual to bullying acts.

The behavior of the ‘observers’ can have a significant impact on the severity and longevity of bullying activities in a global organization and prompts the following research propositions:

**Proposition 6.** ‘Others’ who observe bullying will acquiesce more frequently, because they do not want to be singled-out from the group and increase their chances of being bullied in the future.

**Proposition 7.** Pluralistic ignorance of host country nationals group can encourage bullying behavior to exist and allow it to grow in a global organization.

3.5. Characteristics of the victim

Are there characteristics that make some employees targets of bullies and others who are not harassed by the bully? Anyone can become a bullying victim yet there is a widely held belief that there are individuals that are the primary targets for bullying activities (Aquino, 2000; Aquino & Byron, 2002; Felson & Steadman, 1983; Olweus, 1978; Sparks, Glenn, & Dodd, 1977; Schwartz, Dodge, & Coie, 1993). Frequently, the victim exhibits anxiety and fear. It is therefore thought that individuals become targets of harmful bullying activities because they exhibit characteristics of a victim (Aquino, 2000; Aquino et al., 1999). Victimization is an individual’s (i.e., bullied) self-perception of having been the target, either momentarily or over time, to harmful actions emanating from one or more persons and are more or less accepting of the situation (Aquino & Byron, 2002).

Bullied individuals may be categorized into two basic groups: the largest group being submissive victims (i.e., passive, insecure, rejected by peers, and unlikely to defend themselves against proactive bullying attempts) and the smaller group being provocative victims (i.e., highly aggressive and likely to provoke attacks by others) (Aquino & Bradfield, 2000). There is an opinion that victims precipitate actions by others (either consciously or in situations unconsciously) and thus initiate the sequence of being victimized or become potential future bullying targets through their passive or in some cases their aggressive behavior (i.e., establish themselves as targets because their behavior deviates from the social norms and are not accepted by others in the organization) (Aquino et al., 1999; Aquino & Byron, 2002; Bies & Tripp, 1998).

There are four stages of victimization, which include: (1) the bullied individual experiences harm, injury, or anguish caused by another (i.e., bully) in the work environment; (2) the bullied perceives this treatment as unfair which leads them to view themselves as victims; (3) the bullied individual will frequently attempt to validate their mistreatment with ‘others’ in the organization and have them reinforce the victim perception more widely in the organization; and (4) bullied individuals may attempt to get support from others outside the organization to confirm their victimization (Aquino & Byron, 2002; Viano, 1989). In some ways by following this progress of victimization, the bullied individuals institutionalize themselves as ‘official’ targets of bullies in the organization and at the same time diminishes their social standing in the organization.

There is an alternative viewpoint relative to the behavior pattern of bullied individuals. Being bullied is an adopted learned helplessness behavior (i.e., refusing to take a proactive stance and a failure to take action to make one’s situation/condition better, arising from a sense of not being in control) (Seligman, 1975). In this accepted state of social depression, bullied individuals have ‘learned’ whatever they do is futile and therefore believe that they have little reason to act or what they do will have little affect on the outcome (i.e., a fatalistic orientation to bullying activities, “I deserve it because..."
Proposition 8. Bullies will frequently identify individuals in an organization that exhibit passive, permissive behaviors as primary targets to bully.

Proposition 9. Highly aggressive individuals in an organization can become targets of bullies because of their visibility in the organization as well as presenting themselves as a potential threat to the bully.

Proposition 10. There is a tendency for individuals to feel that bullying behavior is acceptable in the organization and there is nothing they can do to prevent or contain it.

3.6. Bullying behavior/events over time

One of the most difficult things to manage when trying to address bullying behavior is that it is usually not an isolated event. On the contrary, once the behavior is exhibited, the environment plays a major role in determining the frequency of the event. Retaliation or lack of acceptance by the victim and/or reprimands by observers or management are crucial elements in the determination of the aberrant behavior being repeated (Luzio-Lockett, 1995). It is posited that even if the stress or initial stimulus for the bullying behavior goes away, the bully will continue over time to behave inappropriately until some external force or mechanism intervenes and regulates the behavior.

“Recognizing the pattern of events provides a key to identifying the bullying and is a principal tool for those few global organizations who are currently implementing systems to deal with bullying within their workplace” (Rayner & Cooper, 1997, p. 212). Fundamentally, if nothing else management needs to recognize the prominent organizational stimuli for reoccurring bullying behavior: (1) the natural target—those who allow themselves to be victimized (Luzio-Lockett, 1995); (2) the climate—the acceptance or ignoring of the acts by management or leadership (Zapf, 1999); and (3) high stress situations or rapid changes of the job and environment (Einarsen, 1999; Sheehan, 1999). By not proactively addressing the ‘climate’ of bullying in an organization, management can be considered negligent in not providing a safe work environment for its employees. In addition, there is an ethical issue associated with helping to ensure fairness and the well being of employees who are in the organization.

4. The future of bullying in global organizations

One could argue that given the increased political sensitivity in many countries coupled with increased awareness throughout the world of the equitable treatment of employees in the work environment that bullying might actually subside. There is very little...
indication that bullying will decline in organizations as they continue to globalize their operations (Sheehan, Barker, & Rayner, 1999). The increased complexity of the business environment coupled with the lack of an adequate experience and competency basis (i.e., managing in a global context) would support the contention that bullying will continue to escalate. The question becomes what can be done to better understand bullying in a global context?

The current paper has argued that there are two dimensions that affect both the propensity to engage in bullying behavior. First, the ‘players’ in the bullying event (i.e., the bully, the bullied, ‘others’, and management) will use a variety of reference points to determine the appropriateness of the bullying activity. Second, not only will different reference points be used, there is a potential difference in the timeframes that could also be evoked by the various constituents to the bullying event. These two dimensions make predicting and managing the future bullying activities problematic. Given the various reference point perspectives as one moves from one part of the global organization to another and the resulting frame-of-reference differences establishing control over bullying will be difficult. Merely being aware of bullying activities will be challenging given the geographic dispersion of the global operating units of the organization. At the same time, the different cultural standards both macro and organizational underscore the point that bullying activities will be hard to identify and even harder to act upon by global management.

Bullying cross-culturally will be more difficult to manage than within the context of a single country. In addition, the experience base of most global managers will not provide an adequate foundation to effectively deal with the repercussions of bullying in global organizations. Therefore, attention needs to be given to the unique dimensions of bullying in multiple cultures. Indeed, managers of global organizations need an increased understanding on how to address the extensive problems that can occur from aggressive, dysfunctional bullying activities.

In an effort to gain insight/control over bullying activities in global organizations, the management should examine six issues: (1) make an assessment of the present culture relative to bullying in the organization (i.e., internal benchmark); (2) make an assessment of the occurrence of bullying behavior by location in the organization; (3) make an assessment of global manager’s behaviors taken relative to past bullying activities (i.e., determine the action taken and what corrective measures were instituted); (4) make an assessment of corporate policies relative to bullying behavior and make revisions to these policies given the level of bullying activities; (5) development of a reporting mechanism for global feedback on the occurrence of bullying in the global organization; (6) establish a monitoring/auditing process directed at assessing bullying activities in the global organization. These steps should provide the foundation for establishing higher awareness and increased vigilance over bullying activities throughout the global organization.

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