Upwards Workplace Bullying: A Literature Review

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Abstract
There is a large body of international literature on most aspects of workplace bullying, yet there are only a few research articles dealing with bullying of bosses, managers, and leaders by their subordinates and staff members. Over time the term “upwards bullying” has been accepted as the generic term to describe this phenomenon but using these search terms does not provide a comprehensive indication of relevant publications. This literature review identifies and collates English language research on upwards bullying to document its research status, its lack of visibility in the workplace, and to connect upwards bullying with related research on aggression against supervisors and managers. Included is research that specifically labels the phenomena as upwards or upward bullying, along with related terms of subordinate-initiated bullying, supervisor-targeted bullying, bottom-up bullying, bullying the manager, and bullying the boss. Nonacademic publications are not included, nor is research on related workplace misbehavior such as cyberbullying, legal action resulting from upwards bullying or whistle blowers, and extortion or blackmail. Areas for further exploration in the field are identified with indicators of how this type of workplace bullying differs from lateral and downward bullying. Coverage up to the year 2020 is provided with the expectation that the trend of working from home driven by safety considerations during the COVID-19 epidemic could change employee responses and reactions to their workplace leaders and management.

Keywords
upwards bullying, bullying the boss, supervisor-targeted bullying, bottom-up bullying, subordinate-initiated bullying

Workplace bullying is an international plight that transcends geographic and cultural boundaries. Its pervasiveness in all environments is reflected in the research literature that documents the problem in both the private and public sectors (Catley et al., 2013; Hutchinson & Jackson, 2015; Nguyen et al., 2019). Workplace bullying is known to occur in offices and manufacturing factories (Rodriguez, 2017; Salin, 2001; Sims & Sun, 2012), in corporate boardrooms (Harvey et al., 2006), in tax-funded community services (Gershman, 2014; Griffith et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2018), in health care venues (Hutchinson et al., 2006; Lambeth, 2015; Shabazz et al., 2016), in service industries providing social support and assistance (Hallberg & Strandmark, 2006; Inness et al., 2008), and in the hospitality industry (Chung et al., 2021; Okafor & Okoye, 2017; Ram, 2015). There are many examples of workplace bullying in institutions of higher education (Hodgins et al., 2017; Hollis, 2015; Howard, 2011; Zabrodka & Kveton, 2013), in politics and all levels of government (Francis, 2019; Reid, 2009, 2016; Rheault et al., 2019), as well as in religious institutions (Finlan, 2015; Turner, 2018). With no workplace assured of protection from bullying, it is not surprising that individuals at any level of an organization can become unwilling targets of abuse, or bystanders who witness attacks against colleagues.

After three decades of study, the variations and nuances of how, when, where, and why bullying manifests itself in different employment settings have been well explored. Much of this documented research is based upon the most frequently encountered examples of workplace bullying, that of top-down bullying where the leader in charge is the instigator of the bullying. A second category of workplace bullying also has received significant study, that of horizontal or lateral bullying, where colleagues target one another outside a reporting line of accountability. The least visible segment of workplace bullying involves upwards bullying where bullying tactics are manipulated and applied against “the boss,” usually for strategically designed outcomes (Jones, 2009; Oade, 2015; Patterson et al., 2018).

This article tracks the history, research, and literature of upwards bullying in the workplace, where employees use calculated tactics against the directors, managers, supervisors, and leaders to whom the subordinates are accountable.

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While there is a huge body of literature on all aspects of workplace bullying, finding relevant publications on upwards bullying is challenging. Searching databases, library catalogs, and popular search engines for the terms “upwards bullying” or “upward bullying” retrieves very few results. Similarly, search strategies to incorporate the directional elements of bullying upwards against leadership targets also miss relevant publications. The Appendix brings together articles found both through traditional database searching using key works “upward(s) bullying” (9 unique items) and through the examination of titles and abstracts of research publications on workplace bullying found through citation tracing (19 unique items). Databases searched for general coverage in all disciplines included Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. PsycINFO, Sociological Abstracts, ABI/INFORM, and Business Source Complete were searched for coverage in disciplines actively tracking workplace bullying. For articles on health related workplaces and impacts on wellness, searches were run in CINAHL, MEDLINE, and Health Business Elite. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global was searched for academic investigations from a theoretical perspective.

The very small number of unique results reflects the limitations of key work searching on search terms that are now commonly used but were not used earlier. To capture results prior to the adoption of “upwards bullying” as the accepted term to describe the phenomena of interest, and for comprehensiveness, citation tracing was undertaken largely as a manual process that looked for an implied vertical pressure structure. Articles which did not specifically identify the bullying as downward within the citation were examined to determine the direction and target of the bullying.

The goals of this review are to collate English language research on upwards bullying, to document its visibility in the workplace and its research status, and to connect upwards bullying with related research on aggression against supervisors and managers. Collating research on the status of upwards workplace bullying allows for the identification of further areas of exploration in the field that need attention. The focus on research articles means that there was no attempt to cover nonacademic publications. Although there was some indication that additional popular and specialized information sources exist, no effort was made to include newspaper articles, articles in popular magazines, websites, and legal action that may have been taken because of upwards bullying. Other limitations include not extending the search to research dealing with specialized aspects of workplace misbehavior, such as cyberbullying, extortion or blackmail, and actions leading to whistleblowing outcomes.

Upwards workplace bullying is predicated upon a definition that incorporates elements of each word in the label that describes the phenomenon. As noted, the focus of this review is on those actions directed by subordinates upwards in a reporting line toward an individual or management group with assigned accountability to achieve organizational objectives. Incorporating the workplace into the definition narrows the locale by excluding schoolyard and classroom bullying (while still allowing for adult instigation of bullying actions when working in educational institutions, child day-care centers, and other youth focused spaces), the home environment, and community spaces in which no one is accountable for specific actions by members of the public. Although agreement on a consistent definition of bullying, and more specifically workplace bullying, has been frequently discussed and debated around the globe, it is recognized that related terms such as aggression, deviance, emotional abuse, harassment, incivility, mistreatment, and mobbing can be synonymous terms unless clarified and tightly defined within research studies. All of these terms are included in the broader category of counterproductive work behavior. Regardless of terms used, researchers in the field generally agree that a series of actions and associated repercussions are considered to be bullying in an employment environment. These components include: the negative effect of the behavior on the target; the repetitive frequency and persistence of aggressive behaviors and inappropriate actions; and the power imbalance that is either in place initially or develops over time so that the targets are unable to defend themselves (Einarsen et al., 2003, p. 25; Saunders et al., 2007, p. 341).

While the mistreatment of employed workers has always existed (Einarsen et al., 2003, p. xiv; Keashly & Harvey, 2005, p. 202), the question arises if upwards abuse of those in charge of the workplace also has been embedded habitually in the workplace, albeit hidden, or if it is a more recent manifestation that has arisen due to evolving environmental, cultural, economic, or political reasons. The research literature over the past three decades includes a number of published reviews on workplace bullying, such as those undertaken by Rayner and Hoel (1997), Beswick et al. (2006), Magnuson and Norem (2009), Branch et al. (2013), Rai and Agarwal (2016), Schilpzand et al. (2016), Nielsen and Einarsen (2018), and D’Cruz and Noronha (2019), which benchmark the ongoing focus of research being undertaken. In each review upwards bullying was not captured in its own right although there were hints that acknowledged the emotional abuse, the social aspects at play, and the subtlety of some tactics applied against targets. Later publications eventually equated and linked these tactics and repercussions as endemic to the phenomenon of upwards bullying.

The Fourth International Conference on Bullying and Harassment in the Workplace (2004) was an early forum to specifically address the issue with two relevant presentations specifically on the topic (Branch et al., 2004a, 2004b). Branch et al. (2004b, p. 32) noted at the time that “[i]t is an unsurprising date, upwards bullying has been reported anecdotally, with only a few studies indicating that upwards bullying does occur (see, e.g., Hoel et al., 2001) and none that investigate upwards bullying as a phenomenon per se.” These anecdotal references bear further review both for their value in early acknowledgement that upwards abuse existed, and also for the timeline on research efforts and their context within workplace bullying as an area of study.
Publications Acknowledging Upwards Bullying (1990–2004)

The earliest identified research study that recorded bullying of leaders by subordinates was written by Miller (1997). This research, with its focus on gender and sexual harassment in the military, could easily be overlooked as an example of upwards bullying. Despite a highly structured military workplace with multiple hierarchies of potential support and intervention, being in charge did not protect against attack by subordinates. The adoption of tactics which are labeled in the article as resistance techniques included: constant scrutiny, rumors, gossip, sabotage, feigning ignorance of expectations, indirect threats, and foot dragging. Decades later these same tactics epitomize key attributes of upwards workplace bullying in non-military workplaces (Branch, 2007; Oade, 2015; Patterson et al., 2018).

Some incidental mentions of upwards bullying in research of the 1990s and early 2000s were limited to one word, notably “subordinates” or “superior”/“supervisor” in the context of the status of perpetrators doing the bullying and the targets being bullied (Cortina et al., 2001, p. 66; Einarsen, 1999, p. 2; LeBlanc & Barling, 2004, p. 9, 11). Several studies described in one or two sentences the perpetrators of bullying as being “... someone less senior than the victim” (Quine, 2001, p. 78) or as “... subordinates [who] attack a boss” (Leymann, 1993, as cited in Schuster, 1996, p. 296). In other examples the acknowledgement of upwards bullying was described as “... supervisors who are at least formally in a superior power position were mobbed by their subordinates” (Zapf et al., 1996, p. 217) or “... the more overlooked bullying of managers by workers” (Cusack, 2000, p. 2118).

Likewise, a single sentence reported upward actions in a context where “... aggressive employees not only are likely to bully their colleagues, but may also be aggressive towards their employer” (Randall, 1997, p. 45). Occasionally an early research study would develop a hypothesis comparing elements in downwards, lateral, and upwards bullying (Baron & Neuman, 1998; Greenberg & Barling, 1999; Keashly et al., 1994) but the low volume of incidents for upwards elements negated conclusive results to differentiate between downwards and horizontal bullying. Nonetheless, indicators of further exploration were recognized within the body of other reports with statements identifying the need to consider “[i]n particular, ‘upwards bullying’ or bullying of supervisors or managers by their staff,” along with the suggestion to “... investigate what happens when distress is driven from the bottom-up” (Lewis & Sheehan, 2003, p. 13). Furthermore, a few research studies documented workplace aggression against those in charge, but the context was perceived as injustice (e.g., overly close supervision, workplace layoffs, a competitive work environment with limited career progression, resentments such as being passed over for promotion) that led to retaliatory actions, whether justified or not, as an assumed explanation for the actions (Baron et al., 1999; Greenberg & Barling, 1999; Hoel et al., 2001). When the research reports expanded coverage of the theme beyond a couple of sentences, the identified issues parallel those of other forms of workplace bullying by delving into the research methods used, the organizational impact, and personnel costs individually and to the company, akin to all forms of workplace bullying (LeBlanc & Barling, 2004; Randall, 2001; Salin, 2001, 2003; Zapf et al., 2003). All of these examples are incidental parts of their publications with none exceeding two or three paragraphs, with the exception of the article by Greenberg and Barling (1999). One other exception was the work presented by Krone (1992) on upward influence. In this article there is no mention made of bullying but some of the tactics employed were intended to deceive their supervisors and hence were inappropriate workplace actions, if not outright bullying.

At this point in the timeline the upwards phenomenon was rarely labeled as such except in conference presentations introducing the concept (Branch et al., 2003, 2004). Instead, researchers described actions as they applied to perpetrators and targets with most acknowledging that bullying by subordinates, staff, or workers was occurring in a limited fashion. The terminology in these early studies focused more on related themes of aggression, exclusion, harassment, incivility, mobbing, and predatory bullying. Only one study labeled the actions as upwards in nature using the term “upwards mobbing” (Randall, 2001, p. 29, 30). Similarly, the publication of Dupré’s PhD thesis in 2004 addressed interpersonal aggression targeted toward workplace supervisors without labeling the process as upwards (Dupré, 2004). In this early scholarly examination of the issue, four studies were undertaken to understand insider-initiated aggression and related factors affecting the prediction of, the prevention of, and mediation and mitigation of, this type of aggression. The four studies focused on feelings of interpersonal injustice, aggression among teenage part-time employees, individual factors versus situational specificity of aggression, and the escalation of aggression. The focus in all four studies was on the aggression itself, with the target of the aggression providing a consistent authority position that was almost a peripheral aspect. Collectively the four studies were continuations of earlier established workplace bullying factors such as interpersonal injustice, abusive supervision, and perceptions of organizational sanctions against aggression. These studies were most useful for examining and sometimes eliminating factors that may be perceived to lead to or prevent aggression toward supervisors, but were less relevant to establishing upwards bullying as a phenomenon in and of itself.

Publications Acknowledging Upwards Bullying (2005–2020)

The literature emerging post 2004 on upwards bullying was still relatively nascent with a continuation of further conference presentations (Branch et al., 2005a, 2005b, 2006,
As the research literature expanded the issue was labeled as a social phenomenon (Branch, 2007, p. iv; Bolling, 2017, p. 53) as opposed to inclusion in the earlier classification of general workplace bullying as an individual (Olweus, 1991, as cited in Ramsay et al., 2011, p. 800) or interpersonal/organizational phenomenon (Einarsen et al., 2003, p. 3). Accurately naming the problem is critical for concept formation and to collect appropriate, relevant data (Sartori, 1970, p. 1052). Properly identifying an issue also is essential for finding and developing effective responses to the problem. An explicit label raises awareness that there is a real issue at stake. In addition, calling the problem out has a related benefit of validating the perspectives of targets and helping those marginalized by the abuse. Naming the problem assists in determining what has been studied and published in the field.

Since 2005, research reports regularly included aspects of upwards bullying as part of a hypotheses being explored even though the concept was neither the primary focus of the research nor a feature unique to upwards bullying. Examples of upwards bullying in broader workplace bullying research continue to be found to the present (Bulutlar & Öz, 2009; D’Cruz & Noronha, 2016; Fox & Spector, 2005; Hershcovis, 2011; Hershcovis et al., 2007; Howard et al., 2016; Inness et al., 2008; Karabulut, 2016; Owoyemi, 2011; Saunders et al., 2007; Tepper, 2007; Thirlwall, 2011; Ventura et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2013). Early examples of articles where the primordial focus was on upwards bullying, even though not labeled as such, were Dupré and Barling (2006) and Inness et al. (2005). While some of the terminology used in most articles of the time still identified the participants as a supervisor targeted individual and the perpetrators of the abuse as subordinates, increasingly the phenomenon of upwards bullying was the focus of the work, and the preferred terminology used. In situations where the research focus remained on the perpetrators and targets, the inclusion of upwards examples provided a more fulsome examination of the experiences and perceptions of those directly involved (Holmwall et al., 2019; Jenkins et al., 2011, 2012). In addition, recent new research works reflect the growing international recognition of examining upwards bullying as the primary research focus (Ariza-Montes et al., 2011, 2014; Björklund et al., 2019; Branch et al., 2021; De Cieri et al., 2019; Patterson et al., 2018; Rosner, 2018; Thomas & Farnham, 2013).

When considering a workplace phenomenon, the year 2020 marks a natural demarcation for coverage. The worldwide spread of the COVID pandemic in 2020 introduced many stressors into the daily work environment that are unprecedented in modern employment. Many businesses failed, while others adopted remote modes of operation and rapid transition to embracing electronic connections to maintain communication with employees. These tactics, while frequently successful in allowing a place of business to survive or buy time until the worse of the pandemic was over, also were fundamental shifts in operation that call into question the ability to compare work environments pre-2020.

By the middle of the 2000s, researchers began to explicitly and consistently label the phenomenon as upwards bullying. This occurred through minimal but regular inclusion of upwards examples in the context of exploring other areas and aspects of workplace bullying (Beirne & Hunter, 2013; Branch, 2008; Branch & Murray, 2015; Dzurec & Bromley, 2012; D’Cruz et al., 2016; Hutchinson et al., 2006; Johnson & Rea, 2009; Kaya & Gurhan, 2021; Keashly & Jagatic, 2011; Kim et al., 2018; Park et al., 2018; Ramsay et al., 2011; Rodriguez, 2017; Rowell, 2005; Salin & Hoel, 2013; Samnani & Singh, 2012; Saunders et al., 2007; Shabazz et al., 2016; Tiye, 2012; Ventura et al., 2015; Waschgler et al., 2013; Watt, 2006). As in earlier examples, these incidental mentions were not the primary focus of the research work.
versus post-2020. The research literature published on upwards bullying into 2021 (Branch et al., 2021) are anchored in a pre-pandemic work environment. Some work sites in which upwards bullying appear to be pervasive, such as the many locations and sectors of the health care system, were deemed essential services where employees were mandated to continue operating in the physical locations in which the services were offered. Other workplaces were able to transition many day-to-day services from a distance by having employees work from home. This is the case for higher education institutions worldwide which have been identified as frequent venues for upwards bullying. These differences in work environments could have an impact on prevalence, frequency, and nuances of upwards bullying, including the use of cyberbullying. Going forward it will be necessary to consider if business choices to deal with the pandemic introduced new factors in the incidence of, and responses to, workplace bullying of all types.

Publications Focused on Distinct Work Environments

Coinciding with the regular inclusion of upwards bullying elements in workplace bullying research, increased public visibility of the issues began to emerge in the later 2000s in short articles in various professional practice journals and newsletters. The nursing profession was the leader in denouncing the prevalence of upward bullying behaviors. Nurses in all health care worksites tracked, researched, and wrote about the problem as it manifested itself in nursing schools around the world (Birks et al., 2014; Goldberg et al., 2013; McDonald, 2008; White, 2013), in clinical learning settings where students undertook placements and practicums (Hunt & Marinii, 2012), then with faculty bullying of academic nursing administrators (LaSala et al., 2016; Mintz-Binder & Calkins, 2012), and through daily occurrence in the health care venues where nurses came to work (Fudge, 2006; Hutchinson et al., 2006; Oade, 2015; Ostrofsky, 2012; Wallace et al., 2010). In the nursing research environment, at three international nursing conferences, a scoping review, a conference presentation, and a meta-synthesis of qualitative evidence of upwards violence were presented (Gaudine et al., 2017; Patrick et al., 2018, 2019), followed by a published systematic review protocol (Gaudine et al., 2019). Not surprisingly, an environment that tolerated bullying of its leaders also was fertile ground for lateral or peer bullying and downward administrative bullying in addition to upwards bullying (DalPezzo & Jett, 2010).

Higher education worksites appear prominently in the research literature as a location where upwards bullying occurs, more so than for most other professions (Davis & Hollis, 2016; Goldberg et al., 2013; Gupta, 2013; Heffernan & Bosetti, 2020; Hodgins & Mannix McNamara, 2017; Kenner & Pressler, 2014; Kennison et al., 2015; Kolanko et al., 2006; LaSala et al., 2016; McDonald, 2008; McKay et al., 2008; Williams et al., 2013; Zabrodaska & Kveton, 2013). The problem of upwards bullying appears in multiple academic forums: as challenges by faculty members to their department heads and deans; as incivility toward senior university administrators; as academic dishonesty or research misrepresentation; and within the learning environment where students exhibit inappropriate classroom behaviors.

There are numerous articles on student incivility with their instructors and general faculty incivility with their academic leaders. Many of these articles do not specifically note that the inappropriate behaviors are targeted upwards yet the context allows for upwards bullying to be occurring (DeGooyer, 2012; Hollis, 2017; Lampley et al., 2016; Luparell, 2005, 2007). As with other forms of workplace bullying, some research attributes motivation as retaliation against perceived injustices. Student bullying against faculty members has been linked in some studies to expectations of academic entitlement (Chowning & Campbell, 2009), poor teaching skills or knowledge leading to lack of respect (Mohammadipour et al., 2018), uncivil faculty behaviors including faculty arrogance and superiority (Gallo, 2012; Masoumpoor et al., 2017), as well as inappropriate classroom behaviors from both students and teaching faculty members (Small et al., 2018). A further complication with classifying these publications as potential examples of upwards bullying is ensuring that student incivility in their educational forums truly equates with upwards bullying in what is the instructors’ workplaces (Howard, 2011). Over and above the student attacks on faculty members, academic administrators also are at risk of abuses that would not generally be visible to observers outside colleges and universities. Those paid to undertake research became front line witnesses to inappropriate behaviors and actions by academic peers targeted upwards, downwards, and laterally (Cassell, 2011; Davis & Hollis, 2016; Raineri et al., 2011). While articles on workplace bullying have investigated interventions and remediation when inappropriate actions are witnessed, there remains a paucity of research into specific redress mechanisms for those in leadership positions in higher education.

On the opposite publication spectrum, upwards bullying began to receive considerable public visibility in the early 2000s in a series of newspaper articles published in Australia. Even in this era, there still was some downplaying of the abuse of individuals in a managerial and supervisory capacity. One noted danger of public perception driven by the media is that anecdotal reports largely publicize the problem without exploring the nature of the issues and ways in which organizations can respond and overcome the problem (Lewis & Sheehan, 2003).

Evolving Research Perspectives

The Appendix collates the published research and academic reports specifically on upwards bullying, along with research...
that uses related terms of subordinated-initiated bullying, supervisor-targeted bullying, bottom-up bullying, bullying the manager and bullying the boss. This collection of research publications demonstrates that upwards bullying is not just a segment of overall workplace bullying but also has a solid body of research in its own right, that is being explored by investigators from around the world.

Generally, new research efforts will begin and expand from established theories within a discipline. For upwards bullying research there is an insufficient body of publications that establish theories to translate into practice. In this absence, adjacent research fields could help to fill the gap. However, “theories guiding workplace bulling research are . . . relatively few and far between . . . A consequence of this lack of theory is that research findings on workplace bullying is difficult to translate into practice and there is a shortage of explanations for how and when bullying is related to other variables” (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018, p. 83). Drawing upon themes identified from the research done to date, theories from other areas such as counter productive work behaviors, resistance research, labor, and grievance processes, and miscellaneous unacceptable workplace actions, could form a good starting point. Nursing researchers are well positioned to develop and apply these related theories to the various workplace environments in which their profession operates.

One significant new direction to come from existing research is that upwards bullying is much more than a response to negative supervision. While poor management has always been an issue, and although retaliation upwards continues to be one of the few options available to disgruntled front line workers, an explanation anchored on retribution fails to capture both the nuances and magnitude of the problem. The corollary also applies: upwards dissent is not necessarily upwards bullying (Redmond et al., 2016). The expression of dissatisfaction in the workplace legitimately needs to be raised within the established reporting structures and must be expressed and received without bullying intentions or expectations.

The frequent incidental acknowledgement of upwards bullying over the past two decades is evidence of its deep roots in the modern workplace. The volume of literature with indicators of upwards bullying gives good reason to conclude that this phenomenon has been, and continues to be, a long term, mostly hidden, problem. Thus the opportunities for a longitudinal research framework, as noted by Rai and Agarwal (2016), allow for greater examination of the process moving from an initial stage to final outcomes. Presently upwards bulling is evident without necessarily being acknowledged and frequently not named when the problem becomes visible. With increasing agreement on the term used to describe the phenomenon, addressing, and resolving inappropriate workplace norms are more readily achievable.

Further efforts are needed to understand how upward workplace bullying is both similar to and distinctive from top down and lateral bullying. Keashly and Harvey (2005) noted the different emphasis in published research that has evolved over time; specifically, that “the literature on workplace violence and aggression has tended to focus more on identifying and understanding the actors while literature on workplace abuse and harassment has focused more on the target and the effects of the abuse” (Keashly & Harvey, 2005, p. 214). The literature on upwards bullying, as identified in the Appendix, is drawing primarily from research undertaken from perspectives anchored in business and management, psychology, and health care venues. The research done to date is indicative of where the problem is most visible. Yet, the incidental acknowledgement of a far larger and multi-faceted problem in many different contexts opens the door to a variety of avenues for additional investigation to verify if the true level of bullying against bosses and leaders has not been subsumed and reported as other types of inappropriate workplace actions.

The subtle nature of bullying tactics against managerial positions is different from top-down bullying and most lateral bullying. The reasons for deploying this approach and for separating upwards bullying from retaliatory frustrations would assist in understanding the unique nature of upwards bullying. Utilizing tactics such as missing deadlines, not attending meetings, withholding expert knowledge, and spreading gossip could be a reflection of being in a worksite where these are the only means to express dissatisfaction. However, these strategies only succeed when many people are involved (Ramsay et al., 2011, p. 802). The intent behind actions speaks to the motivation driving inappropriate workplace behaviors. The underpinnings of what has been classified previously as reactionary retaliation and interpersonal provocation, and what more recently might be labeled as depersonalized bullying, are worthy of further exploration.

The unique aspects of upwards bullying may be complicated to untangle from organizational politics and individual behaviors. The bullying process involves bystanders in addition to the bully and the target, as noted by Rai and Agarwal, and less attention has been focused on the bully and the bystander (Rai & Agarwal, 2016, p. 42). Workplace power dynamics can be manipulated by perpetrators against their leaders outside of the formal organizational structure to coerce and create a power imbalance that can be abused (Branch et al., 2021; Patterson et al., 2018). There is more to be learned about how these power struggles interrelate and their impact and repercussions.

Some research which deals with workplace power dynamics, the strategic motivations of perpetrators, and the unwillingness of targets to be vocal, can be applied in the context of upwards bullying. Managers’ reluctance to seek support and assistance was identified relatively early (Branch et al., 2005b; Branch, Ramsay, Sheehan et al., 2004) but has not been fully explored. The motivations of those involved in a dysfunctional process may need greater scrutiny in the context of what makes upwards attacks distinctive from other forms of bullying. Mobbing and the coordination of group efforts.
against those in charge can be effective tactics when leaders are isolated and the organization is disinterested in leadership challenges. Research understanding of group dynamics and the intent behind targeting a specific individual is relevant to upwards bullying. A recent scoping article on workplace bullying notes that intent is difficult to measure, to prove, and researchers are divided about the importance of intent (D’Cruz & Noronha, 2019, p. 24). Yet, without understanding more fully the perpetrator(s) motivations, it is unknown whether the behaviors are deliberately undertaken to gain control over an individual, as suggested by Dupré and Barling (2006), or if they are elements of strategic political power struggles that are intended to manipulate yet stop short of attempting to gain organizational control (Redmond et al., 2016).

A better understanding of how upwards targeting is manifested in unionized environments speaks to the underlying corporate politics and relationships. Both unions and management are well aware of the damage that can and is done in workplace bullying (Carden & Boyd, 2010; Mellish, 2001; Thomas & Farnham, 2013), yet there is no published research on the extent to which unions and management are aware of upwards bullying in their workplaces and, if aware, have responded to address the upwards problem.

It is well known that young children will bully in the school yard, and the published research shows that bullying continues all the way through higher education and into the workplace. Given that upwards intimidation is undertaken by students in professional programs in higher education, there are knowledge gaps in understanding antecedents in the education systems that pertain to the problem.

The universality of upwards bullying in the workplace makes it a phenomenon of great concern. Broadly applicable solutions across all workplace venues depend upon further understanding of the mechanisms used and in-depth analysis of the issues. The workplace is the common denominator that allows those involved in the problem to be engaged in solutions that may require working backwards to the root of the problem and why this is an international challenge that directly and indirectly affects everyone.

Appendix

Upwards Bullying Publications

Ariza-Montes, J. A., Gutiérrez, A. C. M., & Campos, G. M. (2011). The “bullied” manager: An empirical study of individual, organizational and contextual factors. International Business and Management, 2(2), 6–23. https://doi.org/10.3968/j.ibm.1923842820110202.002

Ariza-Montes, J. A., Muniz, R. N. M., Leal-Rodriguez, A. L., & Leal-Millán, A. G. (2014). Workplace bullying among managers: A multifactorial perspective and understanding. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 11(3), 2657–2682. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph110302657

Birks, M., Budden, L. M., Stewart, L., & Chapman, Y. (2014). Turning the tables: The growth of upward bullying in nursing academia. Journal of Advanced Nursing, 70(8), 1685–1687. https://doi-org.qe2a-proxy.mun.ca/10.1111/jan.12317

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Bolling, J. A. (2017). A phenomenological study of enrolled agent managers bullied by subordinate staff members (Order No. 10288515) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Phoenix,]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.

Branch, S. (2007) Upwards bullying: An exploratory study of power, dependency and the work environment for Australian managers. [Doctoral dissertation, Griffith University]. Griffith University. https://research-repository.griffith.edu.au/handle/10072/366868

Branch, S., Ramsay, S., & Barker, M. (2007). Managers in the firing line: Contributing factors to workplace bullying by staff—an interview study. Journal of Management & Organization, 13(3), 264–281. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1833367200003734

Branch, S., Ramsay, S., & Barker, M. (2008). The bullied boss: A conceptual exploration of upwards bullying. In A. J. Glendon, B. M. Thompson, & B. Myers (Eds.), Advances in organizational psychology, (pp. 93–112). Australian Academic Press.

Branch, S., Ramsay, S., Shallcross, L., Hedges, A., & Barker, M. (2021). Exploring upwards bullying to learn more about workplace bullying. In: P. D’Cruz, E. Noronha, E. Baillien, B. Catley, K. Harlos, A. Hough, & E. G. Mikkelsen (Eds.), Pathways of job-related negative behaviour. Handbooks of workplace bullying, emotional abuse and harassment (p. 2.) Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-0935-9_11

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