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Women, Bullying, and the Construction Industry: A Story of Veiled Gender Dynamics

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The autoethnographic story presented in this chapter explores a *woman's experience of bullying while working in a male-dominated environment.* It reveals something remarkable: women within male-dominated industries sometimes experience bullying at the hands of, not men, but other women. Tina (co-author of this chapter) was a payroll manager at a British construction firm for 15 years. She subsequently resigned following sustained bullying by female colleagues. Her employer refused to acknowledge its seriousness. We interpret her story in two ways. First, we note that Tina's experience broadly corresponds to the framework developed by MacIntosh et al. (2010). This framework suggests women typically experience workplace bullying through multiple stages: Being Conciliatory, Reconsidering, Reducing Interference and Redeveloping

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What Is Workplace Bullying?

The academic literature (explored in detail further on) favours the concepts of both workplace incivility and relational aggression to that of bullying. The merits of this terminology notwithstanding, these were terms that did not resonate with Tina. They seemed to de-sensitise that which the 'bullying' label evokes far more effectively. In the United Kingdom, the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (Acas) (2013), however, do use the term. They define bullying as 'unwanted behaviour that makes someone feel intimidated, degraded, humiliated or offended', with examples ranging from 'spreading malicious rumours, or insulting someone, to exclusion or victimisation'. According to The National Bullying Helpline (2013), one in four people experience workplace bullying at some point and, in stark economic terms, it costs British businesses an estimated £13.75bn per annum. It is against this background that we identify and explore the phenomenon at British Construction (a pseudonym) (BC). BC is a privately owned subsidiary construction company, with its head office in Suffolk in the United Kingdom. The organisation has a large client base across both public and private sectors in Britain, employing 239 men and 33 women, equating to 88% and 12%, respectively. Their work includes the construction of major highways and bridges, waterways, industrial, commercial, and residential infrastructure, and environmental schemes. Contracts range in value from £0.5 m to £20 m.

Tina was a long-serving employee for BC, but ultimately resigned following sustained bullying by female colleagues. On one level, the story told will be one familiar to many of us: daily frustrations at work, resentment, and self-doubt. But on another level, the story reveals dysfunctional behaviour which scholars working in the related fields of work, organisation, and gender can actively help ameliorate. The narrative focuses on the phenomenon of bullying between women, and the male-dominated cultural and leadership mechanisms through which it is unwittingly facilitated.

Reviewing the Literature

Before presenting our story, it is important to provide the scholarly context in which the story is immersed. While conventional reviews of the literature in this field might be expected to rehearse the idea that organisational practice in terms of gender relations tends to lag behind gender equality policy, for our investigation, this is seemingly less relevant. Rather, what is interesting here is the nature of the dynamics *between* women in an organisational environment both constructed and inhabited principally by men.

Although up until the emergence of critical management studies in the early 1990s, gender was virtually ignored in management and organisational analysis (e.g. see Mills 1988), it has since become more expansive (e.g. see Lewis 2014: 1846–1847). Rather than outline in detail how it has influenced a relatively wide variety of theory and application, we seek instead to establish an interpretation of gender in the context of organisational life that recognises complexity, incompleteness and paradox, particularly in respect of the ways in which gender differences have been conceptualised vis-à-vis workplace roles and expectations. We then present bullying between women (some of which appears to reflect queen bee type behaviour) as one such ramification of this complexity. While a hackneyed representation of gender may emphasise female camaraderie built around institutional disadvantage, the experiences of many women are markedly different. These women—at least in a perfunctory sense—cite not men as their organisational nemeses, but women. Indeed, with the death of ex British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in 2013, the media rekindled the debate surrounding her controversial influence in respect of women's rights. Perhaps most notable of all, Thatcher claimed in 1982 that the battle for women's rights had 'largely been won'. However, for many commentators, including Nina Lakhani writing in The Independent, it has been suggested that she was referring to her 'own battle' since the metaphorical glass ceiling broke only for her, and only because she deliberately sought to 'masculinise' herself. This high profile case, we argue, is representative of the more prosaic interpersonal experiences between women within many organisations too.

This literature review is divided as follows: (1) gender, complexity and paradox, (2) women in the construction industry, and (3) workplace bullying between women.

(1) Gender, Complexity, and Paradox

As reflects the heterogeneous nature of the movement itself, the application of feminism in the field of management and organisation is both wide-ranging and divergent. The discourses focussed on gender and leadership, for example, amply demonstrates this variance. Commentary on leadership from the early twentieth century described leaders using adjectives such as ‘competitive’, ‘aggressive’, and ‘dominant’ (e.g. see coverage in Moran 1992). The associated feminist discourse in this period, which asserted above all parity with men, sought to demonstrate women were just as capable of realising these qualities. Thatcher’s controversial political success is often represented in this manner. Broadly speaking, this position resonates with the feminism of the second wave in which attitudes that women were less capable in the workplace were challenged, but still measured principally in accordance with male-biased performance metrics. Later, however, the leadership literature began to explore approaches to leadership distinct from the conventional autocratic, command-and-control, top-down, transactional variety. These included, among others, transformational leadership (see, for example, Burns 1978). This type of leadership came to be seen as better suited to service sector economies. In this context, qualities other than the ability to command and delegate are emphasised. These qualities include cooperation, collaboration, communication and interpersonal skills. While men have purportedly been more successful in respect of transactional leadership, Eagly et al. (2003) have suggested that it is women who have the edge over their male counterparts when it comes to transformational leadership. Broadly speaking, this position resonates with the post-feminism of the third wave, in which it was argued that women have qualities distinct from men and that these warranted more attention. As Moran (1992: 484), reflecting on this broader shift, comments: ‘In the past, most women who succeeded in becoming leaders did so by adopting the masculine style of leadership. There are now indications that women are beginning to make an impact on organizations using their own style of leadership'.

Clearly then, while feminists are typically united in their desire for the contribution and talents of women to be recognised alongside those of men, their convictions as how this is to be achieved vary significantly. The whole discourse is complicated further by other research (see, for example, Powell 1990) which suggests that distinctions between male and female approaches to leadership are minor at most and that they are, in any event, the result of social conditioning rather than innate differences. It is at this point, of course, that we find ourselves pushed up against hitherto unresolved—or, more likely, unresolvable—theoretical presuppositions of determinism. We are therefore bound by social complexity, the transcendence of which doubtless exceeds our abilities. Furthermore, such distinct positions adopted by feminists sympathetic to different schools of thought draw attention to the paradoxical nature of the wider discourse. Moran recognises this: 'The field of gender differences in leadership styles is an area that is full of ambiguity and paradox' (1992: 488). We add to this that the field of leadership styles is by no means unique in this sense. On the contrary, it is representative of the broader feminist movement. However, while such a controversial conclusion to the theoretical background may at first glance appear unsatisfactory, it actually provides an excellent vantage point from which to examine both the experiences of women in the construction industry (in terms of the paradoxical nature of identity construction within the industry) and bullying between women (since this phenomenon apparently flies in the face of assumptions that the disadvantaged share a natural affinity).

(2) Women in the Construction Industry

Construction is one of the most gender-segregated sectors of the UK economy; men constitute over 99% of the employees in the building trades (Ness 2011: 654). It is well reported that the construction industry is characterised by a male-dominated organisational culture (Fielden et al. 2000; McCarthy 2010) rife with sexist attitudes and stereotypes

> These findings seem to indicate that women construction students subscribe to stereotypical perceptions about women and men and 'innate' differences, which imply they believe men are more suited to a career in construction than women. Women construction students were found to value their status as a novelty and, in this sense, seemed to align themselves with (male) construction engineers rather than as women. (ibid. 578)

At this point, Powell et al. make reference to the queen bee syndrome, demonstrating its relevance to the industry, but do not explore it in depth. It is here, then, that we turn to the literature on workplace bullying in general, and the queen bee syndrome in particular.

(3) Workplace Bullying Between Women

The Workplace Bullying Institute (WBI) suggests 71% of female workplace bullying victims cite a woman as the perpetrator. Quoted in the popular press (*Psychologies*), Gary Namie of the WBI suggests that female bullies are more likely to use the relationship between themselves and the other woman as leverage to achieve their aims. Such bullying by 'covert, subtle and manipulative' means is regarded as a reaction to insecurities. The victims of her bullying are 'often independent, skilled and well-liked', and this it would seem suggests jealousy is at least part of the bully's motivation.

In the academic literature, this type of bullying is frequently described as workplace incivility. Miner and Eisheid (2012: 492), drawing on work of Andersson and Pearson, define workplace incivility as 'subtle behavioural slights that violate conventional workplace norms for mutual respect and display a lack of regard for others'. Notably, it has been suggested that workplace incivility is ambiguous (Wachs 2009) since it is displayed through tone of voice, body language, and facial expression, rather than the spoken words (Montgomery et al. 2004; Tunajek 2007). As with more conventional forms of workplace bullying, the ramifications of workplace incivility can destroy workplace relationships and severely compromise productivity if ignored (Pearson et al. 2000; Miner and Eischeid 2012; Naimon et al. 2013).

Method

Ethnography

The review of the literature demonstrates that workplace bullying is often ambiguous, subtle and covert, especially when conceptualised as incivility or relational aggression. It therefore follows that conventional, quantitative methods of research are unlikely to capture its essence. Conversely, ethnography is much more sensitive to such subtleties. Furthermore, ethnography involves researching a subject within the context in which it occurs, using a data collection technique that does not oversimplify the complexities of what is being explored. Indeed, Cowie et al. (2000), as cited in Lester (2009: 448), have commented that ethnographies offer significant potential 'in uncovering subtle, informal, and covert forms of workplace bullying', and it is on this basis that we embrace the approach.

Notably, however, our ethnography is unusual in two ways. First, the ethnography did not involve participant observation in the conventional sense of the researcher watching and participating in the 'native' activities of the researched. Rather, the researcher here *is* the researched. Formally, this is what has become known as autoethnography. Bochner and Ellis (2016: 91) note that 'an autoethnographer's story is [often] a tale of two selves, a journey from 'who I was' to 'who I am' … The story bears witness to what I can mean to live with shame, abuse, addiction, stigma, discrimination … and to gain through testimony.' Following in this vein, but acknowledging that reliving traumatic events is often an unpleasant process (e.g. see, Chatham-Carpenter 2010), there was for Tina a discernible therapeutic value to this project. Second, the data itself—in the form of a diary (discussed further down)—pre-existed the formal study and was not intended at the time for use in this project. Consequently, in further conceptualising our research approach, we have embraced a form of *retrospective* autoethnography, comparable to the approach deployed by Vickers (2007). This is a methodological approach which is slowly gaining traction. For Boncori (2013) and Boncori and Vine (2014), this approach is described as ethnography *a postoriori*. Weir and Clarke (2018) use comparable techniques, exploring in detail the authenticity of the approach.

Diaries

There are significant advantages to the use of diaries in ethnographic research. Open diaries, as used in this case, allow the participant to write in continuous prose and can therefore provide more extensive content. The account thus conveyed is very much in the subject's 'own words' (Hyldegard 2006). Furthermore, where the diary is written in a manner whereby the participant was not at the time aware it would subsequently be subject to analysis (as is the case here), we might reasonably expect its content to be honest, sensitive and free from anticipatory bias (Alaszewski 2006). Of course, a single diary can never represent more than a single perspective and hence cannot be considered an 'objective' record of events, but it does, however, represent an extraordinarily potent vehicle for conveying raw emotional experience. Pseudonyms are used throughout. Finally, it is worth noting that Vickers (2007) made use of her own diary entries in exploring the concept of bullying, and we follow in that tradition.

Data Analysis

Autoethnographic research is undoubtedly challenging, particularly where emotional recall is central to the narrative. Vickers (who reflected on her own previous experience of workplace bullying, although in circumstances somewhat different to those presented here) approached the analysis of the emotional aspect of the research by way of the sensemaking framework described originally by Weick (1995). Although such an approach is implicit in terms of our own endeavours (certainly in terms of the therapeutic affects it has had for Tina), given the specific framing of the workplace bullying experience in the case of our research (i.e. between women, and occurring within a male-dominated environment), we have opted instead to apply two-pronged analysis. First, we apply the experiential framework developed in the bullying literature by MacIntosh et al. following their 2010 study on the effects of workplace bullying on how women work. Second, we examine our data by recourse to a critical reading of the queen bee syndrome.

MacIntosh et al. suggest that women experience workplace bullying in four stages: *Being Conciliatory*, *Reconsidering*, *Reducing Interference*, and *Redeveloping Balance* (MacIntosh et al. 2010). In the first stage, *Being Conciliatory*, victims use peacemaking tactics in an attempt to understand or avoid the bully. During this stage, women also attempt to change their approach to work to fit the bullies' expectations, which may also involve avoiding contact with co-workers. This increases the victim's isolation whilst limiting potential sources of support. Eventually the victim recognises that these conciliatory attempts are futile. It is at this point that the victim progresses to stage two, *Reconsidering*. Here the woman seeks validation from others within the organisation of her own perceptions in an attempt to endorse the reality and severity of her experiences and begins to assess possible courses of action. Once the woman feels validation has been achieved, and one or more suitable courses of action identified, the victim can move on to stage three, *Reducing Interference.* At this point, she can begin to more purposefully pursue selected strategies, before ultimately re-establishing or redefining her relationship with work in the final stage, *Redeveloping Balance.*

Case Context: Tina's Preamble

I was 34 when I started keeping my diary. I worked for BC which is a privately owned, medium-sized construction company employing 239 men and 33 women. At the time of writing the diary, I worked as the payroll manager as part of an accounts team of seven, consisting of five women and two men. The gender composition of the team did not reflect that of the whole organisation.

I kept a diary for the period in which I experienced the bullying; diary entries were mostly made during times of intense emotional experience and were recorded without the knowledge that they would later be used in research. The entries were dated but written in continuous prose.

The bullying I experienced at work took place over a two-year period from 2010 until the point at which I resigned in September 2012. Prior to the bullying, I had worked for the company for 13 years. The frequency of the entries (and the length of those entries) varied considerably over the period in which I kept the diary. They reflected times when I felt powerless and could do nothing but live through the bullying (and consequently barely wrote at all), to times of intense anger (where I wrote extensively as a means of venting my frustrations).

British Construction was run by a board of all-male directors overseen by the CEO, Philip. I worked in the accounts department alongside Alan, my boss, Carla, a purchase ledger supervisor and Catherine, a trainee management accountant as well as two other staff. One member of the team, Kate, a management accountant, had recently resigned. Over the two-year period in question, I was bullied by both Carla and Catherine.

Tina's Story

My diary opens with the following entry:

> I have no idea what I am supposed to have done wrong. [05.09.11]

I was aware that Kate had recently resigned following sustained bullying and I was worried that I was now experiencing the same. The next day:

> I am very conscious that I must adhere to every rule in the book so that no-one can complain about me. [06.09.11]

> It's very rigid and again getting me down. [ibid.]

Carla and Catherine had made me feel left out by ignoring or excluding me, and this is what's getting me down.

> The bullying all seemed so much easier to cope with today because I had Laura to speak to. [07.09.11]

Laura had recently been recruited to the team as a management accountant, as a replacement for Kate. It transpired that Laura was also being bullied.

that the organisation did not realise it was still happening. Notably, he cautioned me not to 'burn my bridges', a comment apparently aimed at deterring me from following in Laura's footsteps. Laura was, by this time, in the process of suing the company.

Discussion

Broadly speaking, Tina's experience of workplace bullying corresponds to the four-stage framework described by MacIntosh et al. (2010).

Being Conciliatory

In the first stage, Being Conciliatory*, victims use peacemaking tactics in an attempt to understand or avoid the bully. During this stage, women also attempt to change their approach to work to 'fit the bully's expectations', which may involve 'avoiding contact with co-workers'. This is reported to increase the victim's isolation whilst limiting potential sources of support.*

The opening entry in Tina's story demonstrates her frustration. She makes multiple attempts both to understand and to avoid the bullies ['I have no idea what I am supposed to have done wrong']. There is a discernible attempt to put herself in the bullies' place ['Perhaps, like Laura, I am just one of those misfit employees']. Her avoidance tactics are numerous too. She deliberately stays at her desk so as to restrict the time available to Carla and Catherine to gossip, and even avoids speaking as she feels the less she says, the less they can chastise her. The effect of this is, inevitably, to increase her isolation. In this way, Carla and Catherine effectively use the 'perceived power imbalance' (Lester 2009: 447; Miner and Eischeid 2012: 494) between themselves and Tina as an enabling structure to generate vulnerability (Miner and Eischeid 2012: 495). They use a manipulative form of 'social intelligence' (Crick et al. 2002) by spreading rumours (Crick and Grotpeter 1995), which erode Tina's self-respect and increase her feelings of vulnerability and self-doubt.

Reconsidering

Eventually the victim recognises that these conciliatory attempts are futile. It is at this point that the victim progresses to stage two, Reconsidering. *Here the woman seeks validation from others within the organisation of her own perceptions in an attempt to endorse the reality and severity of her experiences, and begins to assess possible courses of action.*

Tina's experience corresponds with this, the second stage in the MacIntosh model. Tina clearly seeks validation from others within (and, indeed, beyond) the organisation as evidenced by her endeavours in September 2011 in which her 'Friends, family and Peter helped her to see she was doing nothing wrong and, in effect, 'legitimised her claims' by validating her perceptions of what was going on.' Her diary shows a number of examples of where she sought to validate her perceptions, such as talking things through with Peter and her two confidants: Rachel and Sue. Each of them was a sounding board at one time or another.

Reducing Interference

Once the woman feels validation has been achieved, the victim can move on to stage three, Reducing Interference. *At this point, she can begin to address the situation by exploring potential courses of action.*

Having secured validation from influential peers, Tina begins to make purposeful attempts to address the situation. She arranges and carefully prepares for meetings with each of the perpetrators and, latterly, her manager. Ultimately, of course, this course of action proves unsuccessful. However, Laura's departure demonstrated to Tina that she did have another choice: finding alternative employment.

Redeveloping Balance

Ultimately, the woman re-establishes or redefines her relationship with work in the final stage, Redeveloping Balance.

phenomenon is an important *consequence* of workplace experiences, namely the gender discrimination women experience during their career' (ibid. 521). Our data has revealed something more specific: that queen bee behaviour can proliferate in organisational environments where men do not recognise the subtler, more covert bullying that can take place between women. It is therefore unfortunate that covert bullying such as that reported in this case is described by some as a lower grade of bullying (e.g. Bar-David Consulting), or as something distinct from bullying altogether (e.g. Vickers 2007: 227 & 228). This is probably part of the reason it has not attracted the attention it clearly warrants. It can be just as harmful as more overt forms of bullying, and—in some cases, such as that identified in this research—*more* harmful.

Concluding Thoughts

It is hoped that future research will bring to light other experiences of this nature. After all, this is just one story and, as such, is unlikely to prompt a wholesale shift in attitude. The experiences of more women will doubtless help provide more empirical colour. Other researchers may also wish to incorporate the perspective of the bullies, since this too is an interesting phenomenon and—in all probability—will tell us more about institutional norms than of questionable character on the part of the bullies themselves. On a more practical trajectory, research trained on mitigation is warranted. Clearly, organisations must address incivility and relational aggression. Training of staff to recognise and minimise such behaviour can also help (see, for example, Crothers et al. 2009), but we call for further research as regards to both the specifics and contextualisation of such training. In this sense, rather than deliver generic learning packages to suspicious and disengaged audiences, training must drill down to the particular way each company is organised, paying particular attention to structural-cultural inertia, as well as the manner in which it manages performance: schooling in the subtleties of gender dynamics without descending into stereotypes is not going to be easy and, of itself, warrants careful research. More generally, training is likely to present a significant challenge to the construction industry not least because—and as Worrall et al. (2010) recognise—it is an industry which is extremely fragmented and heterogeneous, both in terms of the supply chain and in respect of firm size. Other researchers may wish to turn the tables completely and explore, for example, whether bullying is experienced between men working in female-dominated environments such as care work and characterise the form this bullying takes by way of comparison.

Finally, it is worth stressing that our data challenge conventional wisdom in respect of addressing gender balance. Williams and Emerson (2001) argue that at the point at which women account for at least 30% of a given workforce, existing sexist cultures will likely be confronted. More recently, Watts (2010: 189) has commented of the construction industry in particular: ‘Because women in construction form such a small minority of the total workforce, with their representation fragmented across a large number of small and medium sized firms, they do not share a collective interest’. Tina’s experience is markedly different. Rather than galvanising a sense of camaraderie, the concentration of women within her particular department is a principle *cause* of division and resentment. In this sense, in reflecting on our data, we echo Powell et al. (2010) in cautioning against attempts to determine a threshold at which female representation in an organisation enables the dislodging of entrenched, sexist attitudes. More broadly, this, of course, underlines our initial assertion that gender dynamics are complex and attempts to determine linear, causal relationships will likely fail. Further research in this vein must, invariably, be sensitive to both nuance and context.

Tina’s Reflection

I hoped, as Vickers (2007) did, that the writing of this chapter would enable me to seek closure. It was difficult on occasion not to feel consumed by the emotions the diary resurrected. Part of me was concerned that in engaging in this process, I was effectively placing my bullies on a pedestal.

My new job was a fresh start. Although the trebled travel time took its own toll on my family and study commitments, it was preferable to feeling angry and powerless. In 2014, BC contacted me to see whether I would consider coming back. With a sense of vindication, I agreed to meet with Alan, expecting him finally to offer some semblance of empathy. Instead, our meeting revealed that nothing had changed in respect of the office relations. Alan continued to demonstrate a complete misunderstanding of the circumstances that had led to my departure in the first place. Indeed, it transpired that BC was hoping I could be lured back to do the same job, but with a £5000 salary reduction. I managed, somehow, to decline politely.

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