

# Deflating power imbalance through personal identity enhancement

Deflating  
power  
imbalance

Shreya Mishra

*Centre for Research Studies, Birla Institute of Management Technology, Noida, India*

Manosi Chaudhuri

*HR/OB, Birla Institute of Management Technology, Noida, India, and*

Ajoy Kumar Dey

*Decision Sciences, Birla Institute of Management Technology, Noida, India*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of the paper is to identify how the intersection of power, context, subjectivity and directionality makes it possible for the targets of workplace bullying to deflate power imbalance between them and the perpetrators.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper is based on nine in-depth interviews with self-reported targets from different public sector organizations in India. The targets were purposively selected keeping in mind that they made deliberate attempts to counter bullying. Constructivist grounded theory approach was used to analyze the data.

**Findings** – Six themes emerged as sources of power imbalance and eight themes as the way of deflating power imbalance. The core category that emerged was “enhancing personal identity”, which was the underlying phenomenon leading to deflation of power imbalance, through the intersection of power, context, subjectivity and directionality.

**Research limitations/implications** – The study indicates that power, context, subjectivity and directionality of bullying help the targets to identify effective strategies of deflating power imbalance. In the process, the targets indulge in personal identity enhancement. It further reinforces the understanding that power does not remain static and may shift from the perpetrator to the target of bullying.

**Practical implications** – The study provides various tactics that targets can use to counter workplace bullying. It implies that targets need not always leave the organization or succumb to the situation in order to deal with bullying. It encourages the targets of bullying and those who deal with bullying targets to indulge in personal identity enhancement through problem-focused strategies of tackling workplace bullying.

**Originality/value** – It also furthers our understanding of workplace bullying from the point of intersection of the four aspects of the phenomenon – power, context, subjectivity and directionality – which allows the targets of bullying to enhance their personal identity.

**Keywords** Identity, Personal identity, Power imbalance, Qualitative study, Workplace bullying

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

The phenomenon of workplace bullying, a global epidemic (Farmer, 2011), took researchers by storm since its initial studies in the 1990s (Leymann, 1996). It involves two parties, one who exhibits bullying behaviour, while the other experiences victimization. It is referred to as “repeated exposure to unwanted negative acts, be it personal or work-related, and of predominantly psychological nature, and where exists a power imbalance between the protagonists” (Hoel *et al.*, 1999). Research on the phenomenon has unveiled various antecedents that lead to bullying (Baillien *et al.*, 2011; Motsei and Nkomo, 2016; Salin, 2003); of these, “power” occupies a significant space in the literature (Hodson *et al.*, 2006; Hutchinson *et al.*, 2006; Salin, 2003). Hence, the disparity of power between the two parties has been considered as the central problem (Tracy *et al.*, 2006).



This paper is a substantially revised and expanded version of a paper titled “Understanding Workplace Bullying Through Multidimensional Power Disparities” presented at International Conference of Management Cases, Greater Noida, 29–30th November, 2018.