

CRITIQUES OF THE ANTI-BULLYING MOVEMENT AND RESPONSES TO THEM

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Paper presented at the 6th International Conference on Workplace Bullying,
Montreal, 4-6 June 2008

For oral presentation at the conference, this is a shortened and unannotated version of a longer paper, which will be available in July or August 2008

Conflict over which ideas are truer, more worth holding and acting on the basis of, is as old as humanity.

A classic example raged in Europe four centuries ago. On one side were scholars like Christoph Scheiner and churchmen like Roberto Bellarmino, who defended the earth-centred astronomy of Ptolemy, according to which the earth stays put while the sun and planets revolve around it. On the other side were scholars like Johannes Kepler and Galileo Galilei, and churchmen like Ascanio Piccolomini, who advocated the newer, sun-centred astronomy of Copernicus, according to which the earth moves around the sun.

Among the many reports on this conflict, a special treasure is science journalist Dava Sobel's 1999 book, *Galileo's Daughter*, which captures the familial, religious, the human complexity surrounding the scientific dispute, especially of the man at the centre of it.

Academic disputes like this one seem to go on forever. In 1992, a commission appointed by Pope John Paul II acknowledged that putting Galileo on trial and convicting him was a mistake. Yet earlier this year, John Paul's successor, Benedict XVI, was disinvented from lecturing at La Sapienza University in Rome, for having earlier said Galileo got what he deserved.

For four reasons, the older conflict in astronomy is a useful benchmark for assessing current conflict in research on bullying. First because it shows the normality of conflict in the history of science. T. S. Kuhn distinguished "crisis science" from "normal science." In a larger sense, "crisis" science is the norm. Consensus over paradigm and theory not only alternates but coincides with division into opposing camps. Scientists sequestered in routine data-gathering and hypothesis-testing within a taken-for-granted conceptual frame miss the issue on which scientific progress most depends, namely which competing conceptual frame is most worth working in.

Second, the Copernican revolution is vivid evidence that in scientific disputes, it matters who wins. If the Roman Church and Ptolemaic astronomers had won four centuries ago, today's aerospace industry would be in the shape it was then. Kepler, Galileo and the other Copernicans were closer to the objective truth than their opponents were, and for this reason their astronomy and physics could be applied to improve conditions of earthly life – as today's world attests.

Third, the Copernican revolution shows how crucial freedom of expression is for ensuring that in scientific disputes, the side closer to the objective truth will prevail. To the extent scientists are prevented from speaking freely the truth as they see it, from debating their competing claims, and from conducting empirical tests, knowledge ceases to advance and society stagnates – or worse.

Last year at the University of Graz, Austria, I came across correspondence dated 1597 between Kepler, then teaching in Graz, and Galileo, his colleague in Florence. Kepler had sent Galileo a book, and the latter wrote back thanking him, calling him “a friend of truth and my companion in the search for it.” Galileo said he had been writing, too, “but have not yet dared to publish it, intimidated by the fate of Copernicus himself, our teacher. He has won undying fame amongst the few and is laughed and whistled at by infinitely more (because the number of fools is so great).” In response, Kepler urged publication: “Be of good courage Galileo and step forward. If I am correct in my assumptions, there are few among the European mathematicians who would differ from us. Such is the power of truth.”

Galileo did step forward in due course, and in 1633, was put on trial for it, convicted, and forced to recant what he knew from his telescope was true. He was not executed as Giordano Bruno had been for similar thinking in 1600. He was officially silenced. It was only despite this fact, only because the Roman Inquisition did not rule the whole of Europe, that there came the Age of Enlightenment. We still live in that age, as witness the acceptability here of my raising critical questions about the very subject matter of this conference.

Finally, Galileo's story is a benchmark because what happened to him is an archetypal example (like the stories of Socrates and Jesus) of the hugely important social process I have been studying these past fifteen years, workplace mobbing. Konrad Lorenz coined this term to describe collective aggression among birds. Paul Heinemann and Heinz Leymann applied it to humans. I have tried to build on their work, focusing on mobbing in academic institutions, those whose defining purpose is the search for truth.

This project has put me in touch with researchers of many related topics: scapegoating, crowd behaviour, school shootings, lynching, witch hunts, wrongful conviction, whistleblowing, racial and sexual prejudice, political correctness, democracy, postmodernism, and more. With researchers working directly in the Lorenz-Leymann tradition on workplace mobbing I have felt an especially close bond. I have also befriended and been befriended by researchers of workplace bullying, some of whom treat *mobbing* and *bullying* as synonyms. This latter tie took me to Gary and Ruth Namie's conference in Oakland in 2000, to the Dublin conference two years ago, and now to this gathering in Montreal.

I view the research on bullying, however, at some distance and with some doubt.

On the one hand, I see *bullying* as an arousal on the individual level of the same impulse to humiliate and socially eliminate a target, as appears on the collective level in *mobbing*. If *mobbing* is defined by the eruption at once of two elemental urges, to gang up and to destroy, then I see *bullying* as the same thing minus the ganging up. These are thus distinct but related phenomena, equal in their legitimacy as subjects of scientific study.

On the other hand, as I read the workplace bullying literature, I often feel a discomfort, as if the thrust of it betrays a different view of the world than appears in the literature on workplace mobbing, to which I have given my career. I have the feeling sometimes that most researchers of bullying play in a ballpark quite separate from mine, even that their game has different rules.

Of the 50 or so academic mobbing targets described on my website – Lawrence Summers, Ward Churchill, Therese Warden, James D. Watson, Norman Finkelstein, Sami Al-Arian, Justine Sergent, many more – few have been identified in academic or public media as targets of bullying. Many have been called bullies themselves.

The term “difficult person” is a common synonym for *bully*, the workmate who needs to be corrected or gotten rid of, the nail sticking up that needs to be hammered down. In the first US book on mobbing, Noa Davenport and her colleagues argue that labeling a workmate a “difficult person” is a technique of mobbing.

Robert Sutton’s popular 2007 book, *The No Asshole Rule*, reports and reflects the work of many presenters at this conference. Yet in her Hammerly Memorial Lecture on Academic Mobbing this spring, Joan Friedenberg criticized Sutton sharply for oversimplifying the complexities of workplace conflict. Sutton is bright and circumspect. He says he worries “slightly” that “if we are too zealous about becoming civility Nazis ...it will stifle creativity and individuality.” Friedenberg’s worry – and mine – is not slight but serious, that Sutton’s book invites workplace mobbing.

A popular motto for colleges in the past, pinpointing their academic purpose, was “Doce, disce, aut discede” – in English, “Teach, Learn, or Leave.” The motto deserves renewed currency in light of Alan Kors and Harvey Silverglate’s 1998 book, *The Shadow University*, which is about academic hangers-on who neither teach nor learn but instead meddle in scholars’ lives. Brock University philosopher Murray Miles has lately reported that his institution has a policy modeled on those at Bath, Kent, and Bradford in the UK, against “academic bullying.” The human rights officer who helps administer Brock’s policy offers a workshop entitled “Unlearn,” the first line of the description of which is, “Be nice, or leave.” I share Miles’s horror at the inversion of values this counsel implies.

The fear underlying this paper is that confronted with the evidence in Galileo’s case, a representative expert on bullying might defend his being put on trial: “Yes, Galileo is a capable scientist, he claims he is loyal to the church, but he is also a very difficult person, actually an asshole. He thinks he knows better than everybody else. In private letters he has said the world is full of fools. By his own admission, he is vain. He has publicly ridiculed even the pope, by putting the pope’s views into the mouth of Simplicius, the simpleton in his *Dialogues*. Galileo is a loud, arrogant, conceited bully. He needs to be taught a lesson, ‘Be nice, or leave.’”

The rise of concern about bullying

One thing sure: bullying has been the subject of vastly increased academic and public concern over the past twenty years. My assistants, Hannah Masterman and Rachel Morrison, and I have tabulated the number of articles that mention the word *bullying* for two-year intervals from 1986-87 to 2006-07. Table One shows the results for two major daily newspapers in the UK, *The Times* and *The Guardian*.

Table One. Number of articles with the word *bullying* and the term “workplace bullying,” two major British newspapers, 1986-87 to 2006-07. Source: Lexis-Nexis Academic.

	<i>Times</i>		<i>Guardian</i>	
	Bullying	Workplace Bullying	Bullying	Workplace Bullying
1986-1987	215	0	135	0
1988-1989	312	0	158	0
1990-1991	290	0	238	1
1992-1993	372	0	346	1
1994-1995	443	3	335	4
1996-1997	515	4	543	3
1998-1999	648	10	636	26
2000-2001	845	10	609	8
2002-2003	1010	10	638	5
2004-2005	1020	13	660	6
2006-2007	1369	23	845	11

The increase in mentions is astounding, more than six-fold over twenty years. Most of them refer to bullying in schools, but mentions of the specific term, “workplace bullying,” show the same ascendant trend, from none at all before 1990, to monthly in *The Times* in recent years.

Table Two shows the same results for four newspapers in the United States and Canada: *The New York Times* and *The Globe & Mail*, the most authoritative national dailies in the two countries, *The Toronto Star*, Canada’s largest daily, and *The Waterloo Region Record*, the smaller daily for my university’s municipal home. The three large newspapers shows the same trend as the two British ones, though the curve starts lower and is not as steep: the increase in mentions is three-fold or four-fold. Notice the incredible rise of interest by the *Waterloo Region Record* in bullying. The word was not mentioned even once in the four-year period, 1986 to 1989; in the most recent two-year period, 2006-07, *bullying* was mentioned, on average, in two articles a week. In results not presented here, the same trend of increasing interest is observed in the case of the specific term, “workplace bullying,” though as in Britain, at a lower level.

Table Two. Number of articles with the word *bullying*, selected US and Canadian newspapers, 1986-87 to 2006-07. Source: Lexis-Nexis Academic.

	<i>New York Times</i>	<i>Globe & Mail</i>	<i>Toronto Star</i>	<i>Waterloo Record</i>
1986-1987	113	62	91	0
1988-1989	131	83	85	0
1990-1991	162	89	189	38
1992-1993	161	119	238	49
1994-1995	181	137	338	75
1996-1997	199	175	200	68
1998-1999	263	209	314	120
2000-2001	293	220	211	134
2002-2003	310	254	313	146
2004-2005	349	250	357	143
2006-2007	336	273	358	199

Now finally, to extend documentation of the trend to continental Europe, Table Three shows the number of mentions of the word *mobbing* in the Austrian daily, *Die Presse*, three German newspapers (*Frankfurter Zeitung*, *Berliner Zeitung*, and *Die Welt*), and the major Italian daily, *La Stampa*. I suspect the same trend would be observable in French newspapers for the term, “harcèlement moral,” in Spanish ones for the term, “acoso moral,” and in the newspapers of the Scandinavian, Low, Baltic, Balkan, and Eastern European countries, for counterpart terms in their respective languages.

Table Three. Number of articles with the word *mobbing*, selected newspapers in continental Europe, 1986-87 to 2006-07. Source: Lexis-Nexis Academic.

	<i>Die Presse</i> (Austria)	<i>Frankfurter</i> <i>Zeitung</i>	<i>Berliner</i> <i>Zeitung</i>	<i>Die Welt</i> (Germany)	<i>La Stampa</i> (Italy)
1986-1987	0	0	0	0	0
1988-1989	0	0	0	0	0
1990-1991	0	0	0	0	0
1992-1993	0	1	0	0	2
1994-1995	0	12	0	0	0
1996-1997	0	25	0	0	1
1998-1999	0	51	0	52	9
2000-2001	0	95	75	72	83
2002-2003	0	116	31	115	77
2004-2005	14	102	35	107	76
2006-2007	47	134	66	85	61

Broadening of definition

Along with the surge of interest in bullying over the past twenty years has come broadening of the word's definition. We see bullying now where earlier we did not.

The word's original meaning was narrower: real or threatened violence, especially for no apparent purpose but to flaunt the aggressor's dominance. In an 1850 study for the British Parliament of conditions for steerage passengers on sailing ships to North America, Vere Foster reported that crew members "without any provocation, cursed and abused, and cuffed and kicked the passengers and their tin cans," and arbitrarily withheld water from them. Foster said he had remonstrated with a crew member, who "said that he would knock me down if I said another word. I was happy to find, however, that my rebuke had the effect of checking for the moment his bullying conduct."

This core meaning of the word *bullying* remains as in the past, the stereotypical example being assault by a big teenager on smaller, weaker peers, mainly for the fun of showing physical and social prowess. Larry Clark's 2001 movie, *Bully*, dramatizes this classic meaning of the word, and shows also what *mobbing* means, when the bully's peers gang up and murder him.

But today, as operationalized by checklists of "negative acts" on questionnaire surveys, the term "workplace bullying" includes not just violent but nonviolent or "psychologically violent" techniques of parading dominance: belittling or unprofessional remarks, bypassing hierarchy, glaring, shouting, swearing, sarcasm, challenging authority, name calling, interrupting, breaching confidentiality, withholding information, rolling the eyes, dirty looks, incivility, rudeness, talking down, eroding another's self-confidence, failing to correct false information, excessive pressure, intrusion on privacy, inappropriate visits to another's office, innuendo, malicious rumours, ostracism, intimidation, changing work guidelines, offensive jokes, assigning too little or too much work, and blocking someone's promotion.

What is going on? What cultural shift underlies the broadening of definition and burgeoning of concern? Two things, according to Barbara Reeves, a prominent New York mediator: more bullying, and more oversensitivity. She cites on the one hand the increasing pressure on managers for workplace efficiency, and on the other hand, the "paper-thin skin" of older workers whose lives haven't been the series of triumphs they expected, and of younger workers from the "every kid on the soccer team gets a trophy" generation.

Reeves is right. We can easily imagine two very different workers scoring high on a checklist of negative acts like those listed above. One is the serious, capable top performer seeking what G. B. Shaw called "the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose considered by yourself to be a mighty one," but who is robbed of that joy by a tyrannical boss, envious co-worker, or subversive subordinate. The other worker scoring high on the checklist is what Shaw described as the polar opposite, the manipulative whiner, "a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy."

To the extent the burgeoning of interest in bullying is due to there being more of it, the explanation lies above all in the cut-throat culture of advanced capitalism, an increasingly winner-take-all economy wherein a dwindling minority calls the shots and tightens its grip on the working lives of the majority. Concentration of capital and power is a hallmark of our time. From scientific management and Fordism a century ago to computer-assisted surveillance and monitoring today, the cardinal trend in work has been toward rationalization, which means stricter control of the lower-downs by the higher-ups. Given neoliberal politics and technological advance, competition has gone global. Nobody's job is safe. Disparity has widened between haves and have-nots. Employees claw their way up the ladders of position and pay in bureaucratic hierarchies, to enlarge their share of the consumer goods that define the good life.

This is to say that the conditions of work and employment in today's world increasingly encourage bullying. For the academic sector, Darla Twale and Barbara De Luca hit the nail on the head with the subtitle of their new book: *The Rise of the Academic Bully Culture....* The hypercompetitive workplace implies that anybody intent on moving up, or even on surviving, has to push the envelope. The former vice-president for development of my university used to say, "We're lean and we're hungry"; he has now moved up to the same position at Oxford University.

But Reeves's point is twofold: not just more bullying but more oversensitivity, more whining, more interpretation of routine verbal abrasions as bullying. This can be understood in terms of the same basic trends of the capitalist economy. What are employees to do when they find themselves on the losing end of the hypercompetitive struggle? Chalk it up to their own inadequacies? More likely they say the system stinks – as it does indeed stink from pollution and depletion of the natural environment, conspicuous consumption, unnecessary wars, and destruction of human community. No surprise, then, that a culture of resentment of success flourishes in countless workplaces, just as "deconstructing" things remain a popular pastime of intellectuals. Among those who partake of the visceral disenchantment with Western civilization that dates mainly from the 1960s, the authorities in today's bureaucracies enjoy little respect. Even a routine directive from the boss can seem like bullying, power-tripping, a personal affront. And if a boss's or colleague's criticism damages my self-esteem, well, by God, I'll file a complaint with the Office of Human Rights and Workplace Dignity.

Is bullying a useful scientific term?

Try as I might, I cannot see *bullying*, in its broader meaning as measured by checklists of negative acts, as a useful scientific term. It conflates the two things Reeves says are going on: more bullying and more oversensitivity. More precisely, it ignores the oversensitivity: the exaggerations, false accusations, and idle bitching. The most common research method, the questionnaire survey, puts too much trust in the alleged victim's viewpoint, which is in fact no more trustworthy than the alleged perpetrator's. The viewpoint that counts in science is that of disciplined, independent observers training their eyes and ears on facts.

For all the strengths of Twale and De Luca's book, they, like most researchers of bullying, consistently privilege the alleged victims' claims. They quote with approval (p. 27) Peyton's argument that "bullying is not about what the perpetrator meant; it is about what the recipient felt." Citing Heim and Murphy, they say "power is in the perception of the receiver or perceiver, not the wielder...." Such either-or thinking is not science. It mires us in the swamp of

irreconcilable difference. There is bias in the view from the top, and jaundice in the view from the bottom. The scientific study of bullying, as of any kind of conflict, requires the researcher to doubt the claims of both sides, and to look independently and objectively at the facts of what is going on.

British commentator Theodore Dalrymple says we today “live in a political culture in which a sense of grievance stands as its own justification: you are wronged if you think you are. Thus, the definition of bullying employed by many NHS trusts for disciplinary purposes is merely that someone should feel bullied: there is no requirement whatever to establish that it is reasonable that he should feel thus bullied. The reason for this absurdity is not hard to see: it increases the power and provides the *locus standi* of bureaucrats to interfere endlessly in the lives of employees, and gives them the extra work by which they prove the indispensable nature of their posts.”

Nothing would advance scholarship on workplace bullying more than for researchers to swear off partiality toward victims’ viewpoints – even if thousands of self-described victims are crying for redress, and even if the questionnaires they fill out yield data amenable to complex statistical analysis. In rural Kenya at this very moment, surveys would show high percentages of the population claiming to be victims of witchcraft, thousands of people demanding redress in the form of burning the witches identified – as occurred two weeks ago to eight old women and three old men in a single mobbing episode. Researchers who accept at face value the claims of alleged victims of bullying might as well go to Kenya and embrace the claims of the allegedly bewitched.

If researchers of bullying would steadfastly look at the data in a scientific way, from all sides and angles, this would be the best possible refutation of New York psychologist Israel Kalman’s incisive critique, that “Society’s current obsession with bullies is little more than a witch-hunt....”