

# An Enlightened Environment? Workplace Bullying and Incivility in Irish Higher Education

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## Abstract

This study explores the experiences of workplace ill-treatment of academic staff in the Irish Higher Education sector, with a focus on organizational response to experienced or witnessed workplace bullying and/or incivility. Workplace bullying is a significant problem, affecting approximately 15% of the workforce, with considerable variation by sector. Educational workplaces typically display prevalence rates that exceed average workplace bullying rates. The negative impacts on health and well-being are well documented and evidence is also emerging to show that organizational responses are less than optimal. The data collected comprise 11 qualitative in-depth interviews with academic staff in three of Ireland's seven Universities. Applying a phenomenological analysis approach, data revealed that participants' experiences were overwhelmingly negative in respect of organizational response, despite the fact that each University had an anti-bullying policy. This is explored and discussed in the context of failure to address the complex power relations, which are particularly relevant in professional organizations, intensified by current changes in the higher educational sector. Study limitations include the small number of Universities and small sample size, thus limiting generalizability.

## Keywords

health promotion, workplace bullying, incivility, higher education, education, social sciences, power relations

## Introduction

*There are strange games played,  
and careers unmade,  
In the quest for wisdom's pearl;  
There are tales of power,  
In the ivory tower,  
That can make your toenails curl*

This synoptic rhyme can be found on Kenneth Westhues' website "Workplace Mobbing in Academe and Beyond." The notion that inhabitants of the ivory tower (academia) are forever locked in power wrangles and career destruction may seem rather somewhat implausible, but there are likely to be some nodding sadly in agreement with this summation of life in the faculty. This article explores the lived experience of workplace bullying and incivility in the Irish higher education context, based on interviews with academic staff from three of Ireland's seven Universities.

Workplace ill-treatment, a term that includes bullying, harassment, unfair management, and violence, is widespread (Fevre et al., 2012; Hodgins et al., 2018). Workplace bullying is the most commonly explored aspect of ill-treatment (Fevre et al., 2012) and is experienced by a significant proportion of workers (Bentley et al., 2009; Fevre et al., 2012; Hodgins

et al., 2018; Namie, 2017; Safe Work Australia, 2017; Task Force on the Prevention of Workplace Bullying, 2001). There is considerable sectoral variation in terms of exposure to bullying. The educational sector is one of the most at-risk sectors for workplace bullying (O'Connell et al., 2007), with the literature evidencing institutional context as a causative factor. There has been significant research interest in public sector and professions, and studies have found particularly high levels of workplace bullying in higher education institutions (HEIs; Björkvist et al., 1994; Giorgi, 2012; McKay & Fratzi, 2011) across many countries, despite the employment of different measurement methodologies.

Workplace bullying is notoriously intractable and few organizations seem able to deal effectively with the problem. Prevention and intervention strategies still fall significantly short of current need (Einarsen et al., 2011; Klein & Martin, 2011) and there is a dearth of research and theoretical debate

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in this regard. The focus of enquiry in this study is the lived experiences of workplace bullying and/or incivility among academic staff in the Irish Higher Education sector, with a particular focus on organizational response and with a view to recommending improved approaches to intervention.

### *Prevalence of Bullying*

There remains yet no consensus in terms of definition of workplace bullying. This is influenced by the complexity of the wide range of agents at play in the workplace, the range of workplace behaviors, and the further complication of the subjective nature of work relationships, making the refining of definitional concepts challenging. This is exacerbated further by the subjectivity of researcher positioning regarding the threshold that negative behaviors must reach before being labeled bullying (Parzefall & Salin, 2010). These issues notwithstanding, most definitions of workplace bullying include references to actions or activities that include specific negative behaviors aimed at an individual, which are persistent and escalating over time, and are perceived by the target to be intentional and deliberate, and against which they cannot defend themselves. Incivility is understood to involve low-intensity negative verbal behaviors with ambiguous intent to harm, although these can spiral into targeted sustained attacks, as which point they have segued into bullying. Because of this overlap, and because people often are slow to identify bullying at the early stages of its trajectory, we included both constructs in the study.

Conceptual complexity has unsurprisingly resulted in a range of different measurement tools and approaches. A meta-analysis of 86 studies arrived at the figure of 14.6% as the average rate of bullying prevalence, but cautioned against comparisons without due consideration of the methodological moderators of location, measurement instrument, and sampling strategy (Nielsen et al., 2009).<sup>1</sup> More specifically, national studies, regardless of measurement instrument employed, find the educational sector to be at greater risk than most other sectors for workplace bullying, and third level institutes to be at particularly high risk. For example, a study conducted in Ireland reported a general national prevalence of 7.9% but a prevalence of 14% for the educational sector (O'Connell et al., 2007). This trend is not specific to Ireland. A study of four sectors in New Zealand found an overall rate of 17.6% with rates of 11% for Travel, 18% for Health, and 22% for Education (Bentley et al., 2009).

With regard to sector-specific studies, workplace bullying has been the subject of at least 20 studies in higher education, although these have employed different sampling methods and different measurement instruments with different cut-off criteria, rendering comparison with each other and with other sectors or organizations challenging (Keashly & Neuman, 2010). In a systematic review of workplace harassment among staff in higher education, 11 studies were reviewed, which employed nine different instruments to measure workplace bullying

(Henning et al., 2017; Hollis, 2015). Comparison is further challenged by the fact that some studies focus only on academic staff, while others include either administrators or professional staff or both. Many, indeed most, focus on one institution and devise a measure for sole use in the study.

These limitations notwithstanding, a number of studies report alarmingly high rates of bullying, and most studies that give a breakdown by gender report higher rates of bullying for female employees (Keashly & Neuman, 2013). Raskauskas (2006) reports that 65% of the staff of six New Zealand Universities had been bullied in the previous year, while Hollis reported a rate of 62% in the past 18 months in her study of American colleges, which she compares to a rate of 37% in a national study (Hollis, 2015). Rates of more than 40% were found in a Canadian, U.S., and U.K. University, respectively (McKay & Fratzi, 2011; Richman et al., 1999; Thomas, 2004). These estimates have to be interpreted prudently, as there is limited information on the provenance of the instruments employed and the cut-off points for "case-ness," but even allowing for some caution, they indicate the sector to be at greater risk. A few studies provide comparative figures for different sectors or workplaces using the same instrument, and these also reinforce this conclusion. For example, using the Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised (NAQ-R; Einarsen et al., 2009), 19% of the staff of one Italian University were exposed to one negative act at least weekly, compared to rates of 15% and 16% for two other non-higher education Italian organizations (Giorgi, 2012). Norwegian University employees experience a prevalence of 16.6% (Oleana, 2014), which is higher than the general Norwegian population, where, using the same measure and criterion, only 14.3% are thus exposed (Thomas, 2004).

The higher prevalence in Universities can at least in part be understood in terms of well-established institutional factors that predispose certain organizations to bullying and coalesce in HEIs. Workplace bullying has been demonstrated to be higher in large organizations (Hodgins et al., 2018; O'Connell et al., 2007; O'Moore, 2000), in public sector organizations (Zapf et al., 2011), and organizations which are male-dominated (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996; Hayman, 2015). It is also more likely in "total" organizations such as the army where 'dominance and power imbalances are strongly emphasized' (Salin, 2003b, p. 1219) and where there is a strong emphasis on rank, authority, and conformity (Archer, 1999) or which are competitive and politicized. HEIs are typically large organizations (Salin, 2003a) and many are public sector. In Ireland, where this study was undertaken, all Universities are publicly funded. New Public Management (NPM) reforms, already associated with an increased likelihood of workplace bullying (Mawdsley & Lewis, 2017; Omari, 2007), and evident throughout the HE sector, include competitiveness among institutions, staff and students, budgetary constraints and increased performance orientation (Bleiklie et al., 2011). Unsurprisingly, working within HEIs is experienced as increasingly competitive,

pressurized (Carson et al., 2013), and therefore politicized. With regard to male-dominated organizations, it is worth noting that Universities are predominantly run and managed by men. Ireland had the lowest proportion of women at professorial level in Universities in a cross-national study conducted in 2011 (O'Connor, 2014). Although just more than half of the staff of Irish Universities are female, less than a quarter are full professors (Higher Education Authority, 2018). Other factors such as poor leadership (Leymann, 1996; Strandmark & Margaretha Hallberg, 2007) and strict hierarchical structures (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996; Leymann, 1996) are also associated with higher levels of bullying, again, likely to be features of HEIs, although not studied specifically in the context of workplace bullying and incivility in HEIs.

Workplace bullying is associated with organizational change, including changes to management, budget cuts, technological change, and internal restructuring (Barling et al., 2009). Organizational change is of particular relevance to the question of why workplace bullying is more prevalent in Universities. Change in the sector has been nothing short of seismic in the past 20 years, principally as a function of NPM, of particular relevance to this study as all Irish Universities are public.<sup>2</sup> The specific features of NPM reform, which aim to make the public service more accountable, efficient, and effective (Omari & Paull, 2017) are beyond the scope of this article for exploration in detail,<sup>3</sup> with the exception of mention of the particular challenges associated with NPM for Universities in Ireland that influence the working environment culture. These include massification, with an increase in admissions of 24% between 2000 and 2012 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2013), managerialism and marketization, for example, the focus on global ranking systems and pressure for better ranking status year-on-year. This has spawned a variety of additional teaching and learning quality-assurance processes, placing considerable additional workload on staff. An increase in precarious work is also observed (Mercille & Murphy, 2015), which is associated with greater risk of workplace bullying (Djurkovic, 2017). More generally, these organizational changes have contributed to more pressurized work environments that form the backdrop to the data collected in this study. In addition, the severe fiscal retrenchment and austerity measures experienced in Ireland soon after the reform agenda (O'Boyle, 2014) led to an intensification of NPM (Mercille & Murphy, 2015) and effectively meant that the organizational changes had to be implemented in the context of drastic cost-cutting measures. Irish public sector workers, between 2008 and 2016, experienced severe pay cuts, for many in the region of 10% (Hardiman, 2010) along with increased demand for services and an insistence that workers "do more with less." Drawing on Keashey and Neuman's (2010) arguments that bullying can be understood in the context of the frustration-aggression hypotheses (i.e., that frustration produces

aggression or a state of readiness to aggress; Dollard et al., 1939), these conditions clearly provide significant frustrations and fraught work environments, which are very likely to contribute to high levels of bullying.

### *Impact on Health*

The impact of bullying and incivility on mental and physical health has been unequivocally demonstrated (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018; see, for example, Balducci et al., 2011; Hogh et al., 2011; Niedhammer et al., 2006; O' Moore et al., 1998) in quantitative studies. Qualitative accounts reinforce these effects but of note is the alarmingly graphic words used by participants, for example, "The bully may have shredded your self-confidence" (Hodgins, 2006, p. 17), "He has left me scarred" (Lewis, 2004, p. 290), and "She has actually cracked my health" (Hallberg, Strandmark, 2006, p. 113). One interviewee described herself as having "gone far down a hole" (Hodgins & Mannix McNamara, 2017). This gives voice to the claim that exposure to bullying in work is a more crippling problem for employees than all other kinds of work-related stress put together (Zapf et al., 2011). The impact on health focuses researchers and practitioners on the need for prevention or the very least amelioration.

### *Poor Organizational Response*

Despite the fact that bullying is a significant problem, with substantial negative impacts on health- and illness-related absence, organizations do not deal well with the problem (Daniels, 2006; Ferris, 2004; McGrath, 2010; McKay & Fratzl, 2011). Although there may be isolated exceptions, generally organizations fail to manage workplace bullying or to prevent it (Kahn & Kahn, 2012; Keashly & Jagatic, 2008; Rayner & McIvor, 2008). Interpersonal management strategies have been found to be ineffective in a climate where bullying is tolerated (Zapf & Gross, 2001, p. 903) Managers frequently dismiss complaints, and according to Moss (2011), when legal redress is sought 73% of cases are dismissed in favor of the defendant. Formal mechanisms provide weak levels of protection, and even large organizations with a dedicated human resource (HR) function fail to navigate the manipulations of the system (Klein & Martin, 2011). Prevention requires a proactive approach, but management typically is reactive and problem-focused (Gillen et al., 2017, p. 1003). Zhang and Leidner comment on the "new" and escalating threat of cyberbullying in the workplace (Zhang & Leidner, 2018), which has been shown to occur in the HEI environment (Cassidy et al., 2014) as being due to perpetrators being permitted in their workplaces to neutralize or justify their bullying behavior (Zhang, 2018). Einarsen, a leading researcher in the field, in 2011, described organizational responses thus "managers and employers, and sometimes even public sector or government bodies, are often

unwilling to accept the very existence of the problem, much less prevent it and manage fairly those cases that come to the fore” (Einarsen et al., 2011, p. 7). Seven years on, the situation has not improved; *we know very little about how to handle and prevent workplace bullying or how to rehabilitate victims of bullying, perpetrators, and work environments* (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018, p. 79). The organizational response in HEIs has not been explored specifically, but the early evidence clearly suggests that the sector is not addressing the problem effectively, and this cannot but be a contributing factor to the prevalence rates (Hodgins & Mannix McNamara, 2017).

## Data and Methods

The study adopted a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of staff in three of Ireland’s seven Universities, aiming to understand how staff experienced the problem of workplace bullying and incivility and their organization’s response to it (Cresswell, 2007; Bradbury-Jones et al., 2016). Phenomenological approaches focus on interpreting unique experiences in context and have been used in workplace bullying literature previously (see, for example, Ahmad & Sheehan, 2017). The study drew on the work of Matua and Van Der Wal (2015) who advocate the “interpretive/hermeneutic approach” as a way to examine contextual factors such as culture, gender, employment, or well-being of people or groups interacting in the experience to arrive at a deeper understanding of the experience (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015), to derive requisite knowledge needed to address the persistent problem of workplace bullying.

Ethical approval was granted by the University Research Ethics Committee of one of the authors, prior to commencement of the study. Issues pertaining to rigor in data collection including quantity of data, time taken to collect data, appropriate context for data collection, and appropriate data collection procedures are outlined below (Tracy, 2010).

Sampling was purposive, self-selecting, and non-random, to explore the perceptions and experiences of those who have experienced or witnessed incivility or bullying in their University workplace.

The intended population was participants across all the Irish Universities. Multiple avenues were pursued to access all, which included communications with Trade Unions (Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union [SIPTU] and Irish Federation of University Teachers [IFUT]) and requests through University management structures. This resulted in staff in three Universities being contacted via trade union membership. This was followed up with snowball sampling via those who volunteered for interview to identify further participants who had experienced the phenomenon under investigation. Interested participants were asked to reply directly to the researchers. All participants were given an information leaflet about the study upon contact, they were given time to consider participation, and they

subsequently participated in interview once they gave informed consent.

The invitation to participate in the study was based on interest and experience of bullying or incivility in Universities; either direct experience or as a witness. The term incivility was included to allay potential concerns regarding self-labeling as experiencing bullying and is defined as per definition in the Introduction section of this paper. The data comprised 217 pages of transcribed text, collected over a 9-month period. The interview was semi-structured in nature, containing questions about experiences of bullying or incivility at work, effects and impact, organizational responses, and the efficacy or not of responses (if any). The same protocol was employed for all participants. Face-to-face interviews were conducted at a location chosen by each participant. The duration of the interviews ranged from 60 to 80 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. All interviews were conducted by one author and her research assistant. The authors have extensive experience in both interviewing and professional service.

Twenty one participants replied and 20 subsequently agreed to take part in the study, from both administrative and academic posts. Preliminary reading of the data indicated different emphases and experiences for administrative and academic staff, and so, the data were divided into two sub-studies. The data presented here comprise the 11 interviews from participants that were academic staff. Six participants were from University 1, four from University 2, and one from University 3. Ten were female. All were given pseudonyms for data analysis and presentation.

A descriptive phenomenological data analysis was undertaken (Cresswell, 2007). The interview transcripts were systematically read and re-read by both authors, and any identifying features were removed. Significant statements or text segments were highlighted and grouped together to develop clusters of meaning (Cresswell, 2007). As part of the analysis process, the data were also categorized by “incident,” by “organizational response,” by “effect on target” and by “language used,” and finally collated into cross cutting themes agreed by both authors to best represent and portray the dimensions of participants’ experiences. One author led the analysis, with the second author corresponding and challenging interpretations, until agreement was reached on the final themes.

## Results

All participants recounted bullying incidents, although only 10 of 11 participants described incidents in which they were the targets, and some reported witnessing in addition to direct experience. The incidents recounted ran the gamut of ill-treatment, including institutional bullying, incivility and rudeness, predatory bullying and aggression, and physical violence. Ten participants were females and one male, reflecting the gender differences in workplace bullying



(Keashly & Neuman, 2013; Lester, 2013). All participants had academic posts as teaching/lecturing staff in one of the three Universities in the study. Two main themes were identified, which we have named ‘Tales of Power’ and “The Ivory Tower.”

### “Tales of Power”

The first of the two main themes emerging from the analysis was the importance of power in the combined experience of bullying and in the response to it. Power structures over-rode any specific practices intended to protect workers. Participants reported incidences in which they experienced either institutional power, which was beyond the reach of anti-bullying policy and procedure, or the abuse of power by a senior member of staff that was not addressed, due to their seniority.

Ann’s experience of institutional power involved University reforms regarding the viability of subjects. Her experience was that this was dealt with in an indirect and underhand manner, it was personalized and it could not be brought to HR, as the procedures for the behavior of the committee making the decision were confidential. Ann acknowledged the necessity of hard decisions regarding phasing out of subjects, yet she felt that the handling of the matter became personal, despite being presented as a rational, managerial decision. She explained,

I don’t mind it being about the subject, I do mind it being about me . . . it shouldn’t have been about me, but it began to be about me.

Meetings occurred between senior colleagues to discuss her subject. She was informally told about these by one of her colleagues and she understood that her performance was also part of the discussion:

Then I was told there had been a meeting of senior lecturers and professors from the department. I’ve never been promoted so I’m kind of at the bottom of the heap, and they were told, one of the reasons, was because of my poor performance in research, and my poor performance in generating money, and really, that we were going to get rid of it [subject] [. . .] but it was the personal kind of assassinations of my performance that had to take place in order to justify this behind closed doors. . .

She also was aware that discussions about her subject were undertaken outside of formal meetings, “and she arranged that with the Head of (subject), when they were walking back from the meeting. So my future was decided between the X Building and here.” She found it impossible to seek help because the specific nature of her situation was not explicitly covered by policy in her University, as it was ostensibly an operational matter, and this occluded recognition that buried within it was a personalized attack. She explained that the anti-bullying policy was also problematic because it requires

evidence and her colleagues had agreed not to reveal what happened at a critical meeting:

And they were asked at that meeting, it wasn’t minuted, and they were asked to give an undertaking that they wouldn’t say what had happened at that meeting. One of them told me, and then another of them, because you can’t keep a secret in a place like this. Another of them had, a very senior member of the department had, kind of agreed, that this was going to happen. [. . .] Well, they have a very clear, supposed very clear policy on bullying here, a dignity and respect policy, and part of your duties as an employee is, when you see that happening that you’re meant to say it. Nobody said anything. They all signed up to keep it secret.

Ann felt that she had no recourse to the University’s policy and procedures. This type of situation, in which she felt bullied, undermined, and demoralized and undermined, was not captured under anti-bullying policy and further involved the people to whom she would have been expected to discuss it with in the first instance:

No, No the way this happened, there was no, official response, people who usually respond to this kind of thing, were engaged in the aggression. There are people you can supposedly consult, if you’re being put under this kind of pressure here. But having read the policy on dignity and respect, I didn’t think that would solve my problem talking to a random member of administrative or other staff, I didn’t think that that would- they have an employee support service where you ring up a phone number. But I was in such distress, that I couldn’t formulate what was the problem.

Dee also experienced a situation in which she felt attacked and humiliated for an agenda item, which she had been told a collaborating unit were ready to discuss, but in fact they had not worked on the item, which left her exposed and forced to take the blame for inaction. This she interprets as power play in the academy:

Yeah, I think I was used as a patsy, sort of a way for people who hadn’t organised themselves, to blame me, and insult me, and be generally nasty and use me as a way, and it took a long time for me to kind of see that that was a game, and it wasn’t personal, yeah, but you know it was personal enough at the time, [. . .] . . . and it was a matter of saving face for the (collaborating discipline), and putting the blame over on me.

The power of the institution was felt by Oona, who identified undermining and dismissive treatment over a sustained period, which she attributed to her area of study and her gender. “I suppose it is incivility in one way but at the same time, I feel over the last few years that I’m being sidelined constantly.” Oona recounted a specific incident where she was shouted at and threatened over the re-commissioning of a teaching space for a new post holder without consultation:

Very soon he got very angry with me . . . and told me it was none of my business . . . and considering I had been just teaching there and I thought it was my business. I didn't kind of give way and so he then told me to "be quiet" while he finished his sentence. I know, I kept quiet . . . and then he said . . . 'now you may speak' and I just said "as I was saying." . . . and he just hit the roof . . . roared at me, bawled at me, told me to "get out," showed me to the door. I said to the people . . . who had gone as white as a sheet witnessing this . . . now you see what I mean about lack of information. . . .

When she sought help, she describes being told "oh this is really serious we have to investigate it but actually it's not bullying . . . and actually the union said afterwards . . . no you can't use that word." The union's explanation of why the issue did not constitute bullying and as such was not catered for in University policy was because the behaviors were part of "legitimate" recommissioning of facilities. In this way, because the situation was embedded in what was seen to University business, the personal attack and the aggression was ignored and placed outside of policy. The aggression inherent in the recommissioning was apparently, perfectly acceptable.

However, there were also many examples of direct, individually-focused aggression in the data, which were enacted by senior staff members and which were not addressed due to their seniority. Fiona experienced one incident of extreme verbal abuse and personal attack on her work. She felt she had no avenue of redress as the policy clearly stated that one incident does not constitute bullying:

Part of the reason why I didn't report anything was because when I looked up my institution's bullying policy, it clearly stated that I, the person who was making a claim would have to show a series of repeated behaviour. Repeated behaviour over a certain period it said and I saw that as a clear statement of this is what needs to happen so . . . I began to keep a journal of the incidents that I had with the individual in question.

Fiona found that once the perpetrator realized she was taking notes, the behavior stopped, providing some form of protection for her, yet preventing her raising the issue with HR, because this would confine it to one incident. The incident was extreme and was experienced in the context of previous "tension," which also eluded the definition of repetition:

It wasn't that there was a big run in before that but there was an underlying sort of tension and then it absolutely erupted. I sent an e-mail and as soon as I had sent it, I could hear his door slam down the corridor and I have never been talked to like I was talked to in my office that day. He came in . . . he stood over me . . . literally his arms out over me threateningly . . . how dare I . . . and how dare I talk to him like that. I have just never been made feel that way, somebody who actually in the middle of a workweek when they were students and other members of staff around . . . to come barging into an office and start shouting. I was literally shaking in my chair and I am not somebody who is

intimidated easily . . . I literally was stunned . . . and then accusations came from him about . . . "oh I always knew you were like this" and . . . 'this is testament to your character.' So I answered "excuse me what are you referring to?" and he backtracked saying . . . "no" . . . "and . . . "well" . . . and he couldn't give any examples to back up any of the kinds of things he was saying. I personally tried to maintain my calm but I just . . . I felt really embarrassed because . . . I did start to cry . . . I couldn't keep my composure.

She later discovered some contract staff who had since left the University had had similar experiences with this perpetrator and had informed management before leaving. Because as she did not have the evidence of these, she could not use their experiences in combination with her own to raise an issue. Fiona remained troubled by the fact that she didn't complain, as this could have protected others. She believed that the policy did not permit her to do so:

I know I don't have grounds [. . .] on the current criteria policy but to see it happening to other people is just awful, I should have done something ah . . . I was delighted to hear that the two contract people, that they had taken their own measures (left the organization).

Brenda calls this unwillingness to challenge the powerful as "some kind of strange belief in the legitimacy of hierarchy." Brenda and her colleagues experienced a high level of aggressive behavior from their Head<sup>4</sup> for several years that consistently went unchallenged. Brenda recounts that the behavior of this particular member of staff was well known at the highest level of the University:

I was talking to someone the other day, who said to me, when they see the President of University, he say's how's (perpetrator name) been behaving lately?

Despite this, the aggressive behavior was not addressed which Brenda attributes to systemic failure to address bullying:

We went with and we had talks with the unions, HR, Deans, had hours on the phone with HR people . . . No, they will do nothing about (name). There are bullying and harassment and hostile workplace policies, they don't enforce any of them. Nothing ever happened to (name), nothing ever will. They are afraid . . .

One attempt to address the problem involved HR recommending a consultant to discuss matters generally in the Unit, rather than investigating the behavior of the perpetrator. The perpetrator managed to control the discussion at these meetings in such a way that any problems with their own behavior or management style were averted.

Fiona did discuss her incident with another senior staff member, simply to request that she did not have to deal with the perpetrator:

But what disappointed me more than what happened was the lack of any action taken at all. All I wanted from the Head was not to have to deal with this individual. Could I report directly to the Head himself, and he sat and said “you know he is a particular character” and that “we all have different cultures of doing things and I am sure you appreciate that (name of perpetrator) is a big asset to this department.” Obviously, the implication there was that perhaps I wasn’t . . . which is what I perceived from what was being said to me . . .

This request was not met and she found he was subsequently a member of her progression board.

Eoin recalls a similar situation in which a senior staff member was never taken to account, despite the effects on staff:

There was a huge bullying issue. It was terrible, but people ended up on long-term leave [. . .] It was tacitly acknowledged that the people that were out, were legitimately compromised and pressurised, and unfairly treated [. . .] and eventually that person, was in a very senior position, left, and the situation became solved . . . but that was actually a horrendous position. It was people down the hierarchy that got the brunt of that, it was secretaries, and admin people and the like, in that area that seemed to get the bulk of the hassle, and also doctoral students.

Hierarchy in higher education is, according to Oona, “really tangible” and “in your face.” Ita described management styles to be related to one’s place in the hierarchy, with increasingly aggressive behavior being permitted at highest level. This was also reported by Molly who emphasized how abuse of hierarchical power is legitimated and beyond intervention:

I had an incident recently where a member of staff raised some concerns. A senior member of the University staff stood shouted and roared at him and screamed abuse and this was in public in front of about forty-five people. The head of HR sat there and it was another member of staff who finally called a halt to it and said we were invited to ask questions and we were entitled to have a bit of dignity and respect. But HR can sit by when this very senior member of the University staff is abusing a staff member? It shows that it is from the very top, and the message is incredibly clear to the rest of us. It is perfectly acceptable to react this way . . . I have been at more than one occasion where this person has completely lost it. Screamed and shouted banged tables and roared abuse at people . . . and if that is permitted at that level then what happens down the line is perfectly acceptable.

The recognition of how power operates in the University threads its way throughout participant accounts. Power is perceived to be abused frequently, both as the root of the enactment of bullying behaviors and also the basis of nonresponse. For example, Ann referred to an incident, which she identified as being “about power, knocking someone who had been dominant in a subject out of that position, to become dominant.” Brenda spoke of vicious behavior when an academic “was in fear of being taken out of a ‘power position’,” Cora referred to

her Head as someone who “had power over me, and anything I wanted, I never got.” Fiona describes a senior academic involved in bullying as “somebody who had a bit of power and was on a power trip . . .” Ita interpreted the unwillingness of targets to challenge a senior staff member’s bullying behavior as being due to the fact that they had once been a student of his and this created a power relationship, and Dee witnessed what she called, “power plays . . . A misuse of power, people using the opportunity to be the Head of Department and to settle old scores.” Oona referred to senior staff on “power trips” and on “a mission to deliberately disempower targets.” Other references to politics, egos, intense competitiveness, and psychological abuse were present and are manifestations of complex organizational power dynamics.

### *The Ivory Tower*

The second theme to emerge in the analysis was how particular aspects of the University setting create an environment where bullying and incivility are facilitated and blind-eyed.

References to the competitive environment in academia were frequent, and this aspect of University life was seen to have intensified in recent years. For example, Eoin points out

So the fact that there is maybe more emphasis, and . . . a bit less patience with people that don’t publish, I think, is simply a by-product of the fact that that currency, which was very little in evidence many years ago, is now common currency.

Brenda distinguished Universities from corporate organizations on the basis of motivation and saw prestige as a form of power. She reasoned that was why negative behavior occurs in Universities but also why it is maintained, as those who behave this way are rewarded:

You’ll get people who are more power and status oriented, than money oriented, because this is not where you get wealthy, but it is where you can get international prestige. When you have people who are powerful, who want to be powerful, who have a motive toward power, the motive towards status, I think that comes along with not being very nice sometimes, and those are the folks who rise to the top, because they battle for it. You get to power, not everybody, but a good chunk of people get to power, because they are willing, motivated, to engage in those kinds of behaviours.

Participants spoke of how “getting on” is of prime importance in Universities and that to do so, one may have to engage in negative and competitive behaviors. This included behaviors such as the aggressive interpersonal behaviors described in the interviews, but also behaviors such as ignoring the plight of those who are targeted and side-lined by influential staff members. Dee referred this as “keeping one’s head below the parapet.” Brenda, also using militaristic language, observes that those who rise to the top are those that “battle for it.” Gail’s take on this is similar:



This college promotes people who have the ability to aggressively go for things . . . which is a paradox for them when they are suddenly in managerial positions and they aggressively go for everything around them. If it's not working their way, its not working. I don't think the type of people who are successful in academia are the type of people that make successful managers. It's that aggressive approach to things if you go . . . go . . . go . . . and you push . . . push . . . push . . . you expect everybody to do the same.

The University was seen to be a site of the "big ego," where status and identity are a form of power; "it's competitive and it is cut throat, and I think that there is a selection of people who are competitive and egoistic and driven." Participants reflected on how academics are used to being an authority on a subject, an expert voice. This leads to a sense of entitlement and inability to tolerate dissent or challenge. The aggressive behaviors that are required in defending ideas or interpretations spills over into everyday interactions and relationships. Competitiveness was seen by some to be as old as Universities themselves, woven into the fabric of academic life, but others saw it as a result of changes in the sector, a result of the modification of knowledge and increased performativity.

Both Gail and Cora, respectively, see this as an increasing tendency:

There's an awful lot of selfishness is rewarded, which it wasn't before. We worked as a group, before, whereas now, you do your research, and you do your publications, and you are rewarded on that, you're not rewarded on what we used to call a good citizen . . . (Gail)

So things like spending hours helping students, nobody cares about, in a sense of the reward system, or promotion system . . . I think universities also and somebody said this to me, attract an unusual type of person. Whereas now, people are there for the good of themselves. I think now, but it's gotten much more competitive. (Cora)

Participants also described the environment as hostile, permitting such behaviors as discrediting rivals for senior positions, game playing, and pulling ladder up after you. Fiona articulated how Universities are now grappling with the notion of a workplace in the normal sense of the word, in the context of changes in the sector:

We don't have defined workplace etiquette . . . we just don't because it hasn't emerged as a workplace. I am only in recent years beginning to think of it as a workplace. I still think of it as a place of research and a place of collegial space but it's a work place and you need to treat people in the workplace with respect . . .

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the lived experiences of workplace bullying and incivility among academic staff in the Irish Higher Education sector, and in particular to investigate the organizational response to these experiences. It

was not a requirement that participants were targets of bullying themselves, although it was the case that most had direct experience. The data collected here capture a wide diversity of experiences. Incidences of incivility, aggression and psychological violence as well as predatory bullying, work-related bullying, and institutional abuse are described. Most participants did not engage in a discussion with the researcher as to whether what they were discussing "qualified" as bullying or incivility, in contrast to other studies (see Hodgins & Mannix McNamara, 2017; Lewis, 1999). Participants were clear that the situations they were describing constituted bullying and were therefore objectionable.

Power is the currency of the work organization (Vredenburg & Brender, 1998). It forms the context of work relations in all work organizations and finds expression both as power over and power to set the agenda and to influence beliefs. Universities have been described as social institutions, intimately associated with hierarchy and power and where bullying can be used as a strategy for maintaining or gaining power at the expense of others (Keashly & Neuman, 2010). The findings here reinforce the pivotal role of power in bullying and the pernicious exercise of it in the University environment. Power and its abuse were recognized by participants, most particularly in the form of hierarchical power. If the perpetrator was a more senior member of staff, there was great reluctance to address their behavior. Fiona was clearly reminded that her perpetrator was "an asset" to the University, which she interpreted as an implicit comparison to herself as potentially dispensable. Perpetrators were more senior than targets and were viewed as unassailable by virtue of their status in the organization. The findings are consistent with many other studies on bullying in Universities, where perpetrators hold positional power over targets (McKay & Fratzl, 2011; Keashly & Jagatic, 2008; Price Spratlen, 1995; Thomas, 2004; Zabrodska & Kveton, 2013).

The failure of HR to resolve or even address bullying issues is part of this complex web of power relations and are consistent with the examination of bullying redress seeking experiences of Irish teachers, which identified that the procedures of redress themselves had become technologies of further power and subjugation (Mannix McNamara et al., 2017). All three Universities had, at the time of data collection, anti-bullying policies in place that contained a clearly articulated commitment to a work environment in which staff would be free from bullying in any form, and with detailed procedures for raising contravening issues and behaviors. Not all incidents recounted in these interviews were formally reported to HR, neither was aid sought from a trade union in all cases, but all were brought to the attention of a member of staff more senior than the target. In all cases, no satisfactory action was taken by the senior staff member to help or to address the perpetrator's behavior, even in cases of extreme behavior. No investigations of adverse behavior occurred, which resulted in a reprimand for unreasonable behaviors, and as such no instruction for curbing adverse behavior was given.



HR, while expected on one hand to implement a policy that protects staff from bullying each other are also expected to be the strategic partner of management and therefore cannot be a neutral mediator of conflicts between workers and management (Van Gramberg & Teicher, 2006). HR is not impartial (Klein & Martin, 2011; Keashly, 2010). The failure to protect workers with less power, from workers with more, is not unique to higher education, but the accounts provided here resonate with Mintzberg's analysis of the professional organization. In professional organizations, power is often decentralized, and vested in professionals or specialists, with both positional and expert power (Mintzberg, 1979). Therefore, the targets of their bullying have virtually no recourse to action or protection. The way in which HR failed to protect participants in this study demonstrates how they are somewhat emasculated in a professional organization, for example, negating bullying as in Oona's case, ignoring bullying as described by Molly, or advising the target to protect herself but not challenging the perpetrator, as in Dee's account. One account (Molly's) describes the Head of HR witnessing bullying behavior enacted by a senior member of the University staff and neither saying or doing anything. Participants recognized that the seniority and expertise of academics appears to afford these academics a sense of entitlement to abuse others, consistent with Keashly's observation that the rules of engagement in academia permit and promote disagreement, dissent and critique and can be subverted and serve the interests of ambitious staff who wish to undermine and silence rivals (Keashly, 2015).

The data in this study provide further insight into why Universities seem to fail so dramatically at preventing bullying and incivility. In addition to the failure to acknowledge that bullying is an abuse of hierarchical power, there is the failure to recognize that policies, as currently articulated, do not address problems that are complex, relational, and that intersect in multifaceted and iterative ways within organizational processes. Other studies of workplace bullying within HEIs refer to the culture the organization as permissive for bullying to occur (McKay & Fratzl, 2011; Sedivy-Benton et al., 2014). Keashly and Neuman (2010) identify the social, situational, and contextual antecedents to aggression in higher education as including academic culture, climate, values, and work practices and they demonstrate how these serve as causes and consequences of bullying (Keashly & Neuman, 2010). The cultures of HEIs have been discussed in the literature as cultures of silence, toxic cultures, void of ethical management, or leadership such that bullying remains hidden (Hollis, 2015; McKay & Fratzl, 2011; Sedivy-Benton et al., 2014), and these insights are in keeping with the results of this study. The themes that emerged in this study speak very clearly to a culture of power and aggression that runs counter to the perception that Universities are institutions of thinking, reflection, and enlightenment. Many of the definitions of workplace bullying refer to the fact that it is characterized by an imbalance of power (Branch, 2008; Einarsen

et al., 2011; Keashly & Jagatic, 2011; Keashly & Neuman, 2010), that is, the bully is in a position of power over the target, either hierarchical or emotional. However, this view, while relevant, fails to capture the inherent complexity of the power dynamic in bullying (D'Cruz & Norohona, 2009) particularly in academic cultures.

It follows that if anti-bullying policy fails to address power dynamics, it concomitantly fails to address the relational context of workplace bullying, and the findings of this study expose this tension. Specifically, policy appears to be underpinned by a rather mechanistic view of human behavior, assuming rationality reminiscent of F.W. Taylor's positivistic rational perspective; in other words, relationships trundle along until they break and then they are fixed by tools such as mediation, or remediation, or even reprimand, and are put back on the road to trundle off again. The relational context of bullying means that things are not so readily "fixable," no more than the trajectory of disrespectful or abusive behavior is predictable, in the context of organizational micro-politics. Fiona's experience of policy restricting claims to repeated behaviors directed at one target points to some problematic assumptions in policy formulation. In particular, it highlights the assumption that a perpetrator will only target one person at one time and that they will not alter their behavior or move to another target when they suspect that the target will raise an issue. Ann's experience was of being too distressed to be able to coherently formulate the problem in a manner commensurate with policy and this further illustrates how policy is underpinned by an over simplistic and decontextualized view of behavior. Furthermore, policies are clearly not evidence based. The negative impact of bullying on self-worth is incontrovertible, and HEIs, one might argue, have little defense when it comes to ignoring research evidence.

An additional complication with regard to policy formulation is in the failure to acknowledge the possibility of institutional bullying, understood here as pathologized organizational processes that serve to bully, rather than the traditional positioning of bullying as being individual in focus and manifestation (Liefoghe & Davey, 2010). Some participants experienced institutional bullying. Ann perceived that the policy as articulated by the institution did not capture her situation, yet she clearly saw it as a form of bullying, akin to the clandestine decision-making identified by Sedivy-Benton et al. (2014) in their study of bullying in a Canadian University. Oona was told explicitly that her difficulty, while it was "very serious," was not covered by the bullying policy despite the fact that decisions were taken without her knowledge and that in attempting to deal with it she was exposed to verbal aggression. This failure of policies to address institutional bullying is in part due to the persistence of framing bullying as interpersonal aggression. Although this perspective has been challenged in the literature (see Fevre et al., 2012; Leymann HaG, 1996; Salin & Notelaers, 2018) in practice, bullying is still understood and positioned as a "private" interpersonal matter. The fact that

practices, processes, and structures within an organization can effectively “bully” has been identified (e.g., D’Cruz & Norohona, 2009; Roscigno, Lopez, & Hodson, 2009), but this concept receives far less attention than the concept of individualized or interpersonal bullying. Higher education may be particularly prey to this type of bullying, due at least in part to externally induced changes in the sector. Universities are now expected to relinquish their specificity and become more entrepreneurial, corporate, and accountable (Musselin, 2006). This is reflected in the increasing pressure to perform and produce “outputs,” which has necessitated the implementation of quality-assurance processes, described as instrumentality (O’Connor, 2014), which has facilitated the emergence of what is recognized by participants as an increasingly competitive and hostile environment.

## Conclusion

About one-sixth of workers experience workplace bullying, placing them in a risk in terms of their physical and mental health. This rises to at least one-fifth in the case of institutions of higher education (Giorgi, 2009), although it is difficult to arrive at precise figures, given the variation in measurement approaches. The data presented here demonstrate that organizational responses are poor, despite existence of relevant policy. Policy is clearly not serving its intended purpose, due to a failure to address the complex power relations that form a context for bullying. Complex power relations are deepened in professional organizations, particularly those that are performative and output driven, thus Universities are particularly prey to this kind of problem. The changing nature of the University working environment, which increases and intensifies competitiveness in the context of reduced resources, has the potential to exacerbate the issues. Given that the pressure for metrics, performance, and output are set to continue, there is a need for acknowledgment of the potential “pressure cooker” effect on workplace culture and climate. Acknowledgment of the deleterious impact of bullying and incivility on individual health and well-being of staff and for the workplace culture as a whole is necessitated. At the very least policy needs to be that which can be enacted and utilized as a matter of course which is clearly not the case here. Deeper understanding of the complex nature of workplace culture for more effective formulation of policy and procedures would be a significant cornerstone on which to base more effective and meaningful protection for staff and for the organizational culture of HEIs.

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## Notes

1. For example, if a simple self-labeling method is employed (a single question asking “bullied or not” with no definition provided), the average rate is 11.3%, while if a behavioral checklist is used a rate of 18.1% is typical (Nielsen et al., 2009). Most behavioral checklists include incivility items.
2. In the Republic of Ireland, there are seven Universities.
3. For a detailed account, see Diefenbach (2009).
4. “Head” used to cover any senior (position [Dean/Director/Head of School, Discipline of Institute]) to protect from identification.

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