

Bully for Us!

What does the literature on bullying in the workplace have to say about the field of Interpreting and how do we respond to the issues raised?

Having begun to read the work of the late Tim Field, an acknowledged UK expert on bullying in the workplace, it occurs to me that it would be extremely interesting to have his views on the BSL/English Interpreting field. He observed that bullies are people who “compulsively lie, have a Jekyll and Hyde nature, an unusually high verbal facility, charm and a considerable capacity to deceive, an arrested level of emotional development, and a compulsive need to control.”¹ He goes on to say that “The serial bully rarely commits a physical assault or an arrestable offence, preferring instead to remain within the realms of psychological violence and non-arrestable offences.” He also mentions, interestingly, that these are traits often shared with sociopaths.

He describes the usual outcome of bullying behaviour by the serial bully being that “the [person who is the] **target** of bullying is eliminated through forced resignation, unfair dismissal, or early or ill- health retirement.” What is more alarming is the statement “After a short interval of between 2-14 days, the bully selects another target and the cycle restarts. Sometimes another target is selected before the current target is eliminated.” It may well be that many reading this article can identify with this kind of cyclical behaviour and have either observed or been a target of it.

This may be the pattern for those employed within organizations who are targeted by a single fellow staff member and, make no mistake, our industry has more than its fair share of this phenomenon. It is, however, interesting that our industry is also currently showing a rise in the number of independent practitioners (IPs) who do business with a number of organizations who would, in days gone by, have been their sole employer. Whilst the Independent Practitioner is able to choose the kind of and amount of work he or she wishes to accept and is adapting to this new found and hard won autonomy, the “employers” appear to be finding this transition a difficult one to make.

Consequently we have a rise in the number of bullying incidents and patterns of bullying of IPs are becoming more evident. Many of those targeted cite both individual employers and groups of employers as the instigator(s) of this behaviour and are often perplexed as to the underlying reason. It should be noted most strongly that the experts in the fields of psychology and bullying in the workplace agree that the **target** of the behaviour

¹ Fields, Tim: Bully in sight: how to predict, resist, challenge and combat workplace bullying

(previously known as the **victim**) is **never** the **reason** for the bully's behaviour. Those who experience this kind of targeting do, however, usually try to construct some kind of reasoning that would help explain the difficult situation in which they find themselves. Here are some of the explanations that are current in our field.

The Ex-Employee Syndrome

"It's because I left the organisation". "It's because I went freelance".

This usually happens when an employee resigns either to move on to another agency or to establish their own practice. Employers have been known to state (in private of course) that the "disloyal" ex-employee will never get a day's work from them or will alert the remaining staff to the perceived disloyalty. This behaviour has a number of functions in that it leaves the ex-employee with a fear for their earning capacity in the future, dubiety over the rightness of their decision and, at times, a bitter note on which to end their service with the organisation. Let's not forget that it also serves the function of reminding those employees remaining that the same treatment will be on hand for them should they also choose to leave.

The target of this behaviour can often take a number of months, or years, to recover from this treatment and will usually carry around a small pocket of anxiety whenever they come into contact with their previous workplace. It's not uncommon for them to be ostracised by previous colleagues and service users who feel the need to "take sides" in order to protect themselves.

The Sunset Boulevard Syndrome

"Someone said I was as good as this particular colleague when she was younger. She took a dislike to me from that day on."

New members of the profession can find themselves targeted before they even truly begin to learn their craft and can be so ostracised and criticised that they leave the profession. Those who show early promise are at most risk since bullies select their targets using, among others, the following criteria:

- being good at your job, often excelling
- being popular with people (colleagues, customers, clients, pupils, parents, patients, etc)
- being the expert and the person to whom others come for advice, either personal or professional (i.e. you get more attention than the bully)
- having a well-defined set of values which you are unwilling to compromise
- having a strong sense of integrity
- having at least one vulnerability that can be exploited
- refusing to join an established clique
- showing independence of thought or deed

It is particularly difficult if the target of the bullying is compared favorably to another worker who is now older or has been in the profession for a longer time. This reminder that they are no longer the “new kid on the block” seems to be a trigger for those who indulge in bullying behaviour. A complicating factor is that the person targeted may never know that this has been the trigger since they are new to the profession and may not recognise the trigger till much later in their career. This makes it much more likely that the target will try to work out a reason for the bullying and usually blames his/her own behaviour, work practice or character.

The Imposter/Outsider Syndrome

“I was never one of them and they made sure I felt it.”

As mentioned above, being of independent thought and refusing to join an established clique are two of the factors behind the choosing of a target. Often those who do not understand the complexities or the history of our profession are targeted simply because they “don’t belong” or because they mistakenly stumble upon subjects that are generally considered taboo. Initially, it may seem then that those who join the profession from outside the community, non-Children of Sign Language Users, are at greatest risk but it is not always the case. Whilst the demographic of the profession is changing and this group is growing in numbers, those from inside the community are at equal risk since they can be privy to half remembered pieces of information that can expose the bully in all their inadequacy. This last factor, says Field, the need to cover their own inadequacy, is the principle motivating force for all bullies.

Some people report bullying which goes on for three, five or even more years, while some discuss it in terms of a constant backdrop to their working lives, a never ceasing hum to which they have grown accustomed. Many of those targeted, who experience this level and length of bullying, grow so used to it that they unconsciously adapt their working behaviour so that they are brought into as little contact with the bully and their associates² as possible

Whilst this may seem a sensible precaution, it does nothing to highlight, and therefore, end the culture of bullying which has been propagated over the years. It also has the highly damaging side effect of additionally isolating the target of the bully thus weakening them further.

An almost symbiotic relationship can spring up between bully and target, with the behaviour of the bully and the effects on the life of the target becoming all consuming. If the bullying suddenly ceases, rather than anxiety levels dropping, some targets of bullying report a heightened awareness of their working lives, the pattern of their day and the interaction they have with colleagues and clients. It is almost as if the constant hum with which they have lived has ceased and the expectation of it resuming is almost worse

² Incidentally, the use of associates to perpetuate bullying is known as **Vicarious Bullying**. This is generally defined as when someone becomes the instrument of harassment and is deceived and manipulated into bullying on behalf of the primary bully.

than its presence. Even when the bully moves beyond our sphere, the feeling that they still have control can last for some time and cause stress equivalent to an episode of bullying itself.

Whilst very few of the organizations with which we work have any kind of publicly known anti-bullying guidelines which cover IPs, the absence of such Zero Tolerance statements is in itself indicative of the extent to which the culture of bullying is accepted as a norm in our industry. Returning to Tim Fields, he tells us that, “Whilst the law [policy] is not a solution, the presence of a law [policy] is an indication that society has made a judgement that the behaviour is no longer acceptable.”³ He also states that most bullying is the tip of the iceberg, in this case literally meaning that it starts at the top, or near the top of the management chain. Since management is often so heavily implicated, denial of the problem and scapegoating of particular “trouble makers” is the usual tactic of what Fields calls a “toxic environment”. Thus, targeting by an individual or group of individuals becomes institutionalized and the target can feel further demoralized and cornered.

Suicide rates and reported incidences of psychiatric injury traced to bullying have now reached such levels that the government has established working groups on the subject and legislation is expected to be affected. Consequently it may well be time that our industry begins to consider the kind of culture that has been established and attempt to objectively evaluate our behavioural norms. We acknowledge that nothing can change overnight. But a culture of fear, the expectation that challenge brings only negative repercussions, the deeming taboo of the act of questioning or of simply pursuing the career of your choice in the manner of your choice, these issues should and must be examined. Our alternative is to do nothing, continue to accept the culture we have and wait for more colleagues to be damaged and/or leave the profession. Our professionalism, our integrity and our ethics are being called into question. How we respond is up to us.

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1726

³ Fields, Tim: Bully in sight: how to predict, resist, challenge and combat workplace bullying