Two of the questions we did not ask were about therapeutic and delivery models. We are increasingly finding that counselling is presented as something that is delivered in six sessions, and of course there is enormous controversy about the marketing of CBT as the therapy of choice. We would encourage members to engage in the debate, to consider how best to provide a therapeutic service and how to use evidence effectively. The question, discussed extensively at the 2009 BACP annual conference, is how best to create practice-based evidence.

We asked respondents for individual comments and received a large number of very positive messages. We do not have space here to cover them all but BACP Workplace will take heed of each and every one and action them where we can.

Comments made (which we have ensured cannot be attributed to any individual) include:

I'm glad this questionnaire has given me the opportunity to communicate with ACW. I'll look forward to developments! Thanks.

This questionnaire does not invite members' comments on the division's governance.

I think that there should be no additional charge to be a member of BACP Workplace. Could it be part of the BACP membership package?

Journal receipt too infrequent.

The ACW magazine seems to be printed on very expensive glossy paper. Could more modest/less environmentally damaging paper be used instead?

I have benefited from strong support by ACW. It's good to know there was someone there to help me when I needed it. Thank you.

My approaching retirement means that activity in this field will decrease. I want to put on record how valuable I feel the journal, the workshops etc are and have been as a way of keeping in touch with the world of counselling at work. I have felt supported and nourished by various personnel and events. My very best wishes for the future.

I would like to see BACP Workplace providing more of a link between companies and practitioners: conferences seem to be mainly attended by practitioners.

I found it useful to review my membership of ACW using these questions and I am aware that the direction of my work might benefit from a review at this time!

Thank you to all who responded to this questionnaire. Surveys such as these are always limited in what they can achieve but we hope that this will help influence the work of BACP Workplace for its members. ∎

Workplace haras

Dr Michael Walton looks at the motives

Harassment at work remains a significant problem and, in its various guises, threatens the wellbeing of those affected, and the integrity and internal equilibrium of an organisation. It seeks to capitalise on, and possibly magnify, organisational power differentials in order to gain an advantage over others for personal or organisational exploitation and, perhaps, gratification. The power differential exploited can be derived from differing levels of organisational status as well from the differing influencing styles and behaviour.

But is harassment at work inevitable? Is it part and parcel of organisational life and thus something, albeit unwanted, to be expected – and worked with – rather than seen as an aberration of a person's behaviour or evidence that they are socially and psychologically flawed in some way? If so, then presumably the perpetrator logically harasses their 'target' with a purposeful intent, seeking to secure some personal advantage. In which case harassment behaviour should be construed not as antisocial, disturbed or possibly psychotic, but as logical, focused and intentional.

By their actions the perpetrator may well be viewed as powerful and '*bad*' and the 'victim' or 'target' as less powerful but '*good*'. Dichotomous descriptors – such as perpetrator/victim, good/bad, right/wrong, target/targeted – may be convenient ways of describing such relationships, but they simplify rather than elucidate the complexity and complicated nature of the relationships, motives and behaviours involved[1].

Conventionally the assumption is likely to be that such dysfunctional relationships are primarily examples of personalities-in-combat, a contest with winners and losers, and a competition perhaps of egos – yet such descriptions may give too little attention to the wider organisational context in which the harassment is occurring and which may have prompted it in the first place!

Contextual prompts?

So what if such workplace harassment is as much a product of the *operational context* as a product of a dysfunctional interaction between two egos? What if the primary cause of harassment behaviour could be traced back to the organisational context rather than solely based on features of personality alone? For example, organisational contexts that
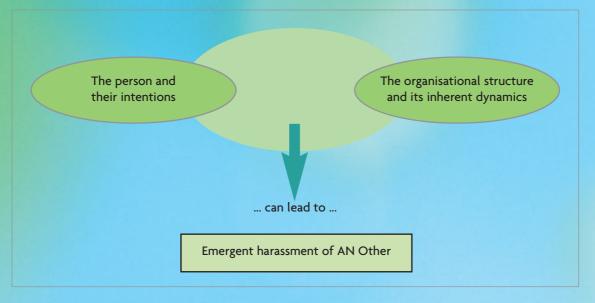
sment: generic or a result of context?

facilitate and encourage dysfunctional relationships such as exploiter/perpetrator, target/victim, bully/bullied, do exist and in such cases both parties could be considered victims of the contextual circumstances in which they find themselves. Such a view offers a different perspective about workplace harassment to conventional thinking about bullying and harassment in general, and would demand more attention be given to examining precipitating contextual conditions. As Thomas and Hersen[2] have commented: '… within many organisations there is a heightened and continuing level of strain, expectation, stress and vigour beyond that which is "healthy" for most of us for too long'. Harassment may be one of the toxic side-products of too much organisational pressure (see also Cartwright and Cooper[3], Campbell et al[4]).

Indeed Buon and Buon[5] consider that the potential for such dysfunctional behaviour exists within each of us, given the right triggers, whereas Walton[6,7] considers organisations to be inherently dysfunctional. In combination, these two perspectives highlight an inherent, and largely neglected, facet of organisational life: namely, that the everyday contexts within which people do their work can trigger latent dysfunctional behaviours and dynamics. Behaviours that can – and do – undo the very best in us and damage not only those involved but the organisation at large.

Viewing organisations as inherently dysfunctional, shifts the balance of attention about harassment and workplace bullying from being primarily defined as interpersonal power dynamics to one in which *contextual* factors within the workplace are also seen to exert a significant effect on the incidence and extent of workplace harassment. Such a redefinition of dysfunctional workplace dynamics reinforces the need for workplace counsellors to understand the organisational world in which their clients operate just as much as they have been trained to appreciate the intrapersonal world of the person in front of them. As Hughes[8] observes, 'we need to show that counselling in the workplace is not isolated from the organisation but interconnected', as illustrated below in figure 1.

Monitoring the dynamic interplay within organisations is one of the keys not only to employee wellbeing but to underpinning effective organisational performance. Workplace counselling – as a profoundly interconnected endeavour – thus has a role to play in integrating the patterns of concerns raised with them with the contextual dynamics of the organisation at large. What remains somewhat of a mystery is how such dimensions of organisational life still tend to remain disconnected in the majority of assessments of business performance and organisational effectiveness.

Figure 1. The interconnectedness of personal and organisational dynamics

Dr Michael Walton PhD is a director of People in Organisations Ltd and a visiting fellow in the Centre for Leadership Studies, University of Exeter Business School (google 'Dr Michael Walton' for more details).

In this regard Puplampu[9] offers an interesting perspective in describing organisations as *distressed* and offers six indicators of organisational ill heath from his research, which the interested workplace counsellor may find helpful to note. These are: executive delusions of grandeur, procedural weaknesses, malicious employee alienation, redundant employee alienation, organisational haemorrhaging or constipation [ie of staff], and corporate directionlessness. Kets de Vries and Miller[10], among others, have also described organisations in terms of their instability and internal toxicity, and offer perspectives that the workplace counsellor would probably be able to readily recognise from the work.

Positioning the workplace counsellor

Given the issues noted above, how might the role of the workplace counsellor be better positioned so that business leaders and managers:

■ feel able to acknowledge more clearly how contextual dynamics influence organisational behaviour and can generate and foster the conditions within which workplace harassment can thrive and take hold *and*

■ see more clearly the value that the workplace counsellor can bring to their organisation through highlighting workplace processes that are destructive and disruptive to effective business functioning and debilitating to staff?

While much tyranny in the workplace may be attributed to the errant and penalistic behaviour of dysfunctional bosses (and toxic followers), they do require internal conditions that will allow such behaviour to be accommodated and sustained in the first place. If concerns about the state of the organisation could be elevated to be on a par with the degree of attention given to cases of harassment, this would be one way of reinforcing just how significant organisational dynamics are in cases of workplace harassment[11].

Recent surveys[8,12] reinforce the significance of constructive relationships with one's colleague(s) in fostering and maintaining personal wellbeing and (probably) more effective organisational working. These reports indicate that difficulties at work often revolve, among other matters, around boss/subordinate dynamics. Such findings, however, continue to promote a perception that the issues to be tackled reside primarily in either, or both, of the parties involved. In other words, that dysfunctional harassment behaviours arise because of character limitations in the people involved and thus are rather less to do with

(i) the specific scenarios in which people find themselves confronting or (ii) the broader circumstances affecting that workplace as a whole. Thus, the parties involved in harassment scenarios are in various ways flawed, less than perfect or acceptable, and thus *personally* at fault. While this may reflect much contemporary thinking, it is not, given the hypothesis proposed in this article, the complete story because insufficient attention is given to the impact of context in harassment cases.

The fraud triangle

While the potential for harassing behaviour may be latent within each of us, and while the ways of working developed within organisations may allow, prompt and sustain intrinsically dysfunctional working practices, there is nothing to suggest that such latent destructive potentialities will inevitably emerge and take hold. But latent harassment behaviour may be more likely to be triggered when potential perpetrators are under pressure, become frustrated and see opportunities to exploit those around them[13]. Daily business workings inherently provide the prompts for potential harassment such as increased work pressure, minor personality clashes, internal rivalries, workflow frustrations, tittle-tattle, turf wars etc.

One useful way of describing factors which, in combination, can prompt harassment, is 'the fraud triangle'[14]. The fraud triangle suggests that fraud – but in our case harassment – is more likely to arise when the fraudster (harasser) (i) comes under too much *pressure* or where the incentive to harass becomes too appealing to deny; (ii) when the *opportunity* to commit fraud (harass) exists, or can be easily created; and (iii) when the fraudster (harasser) can *rationalise* to themselves that their otherwise disreputable behaviour can be justified as 'ok' given the circumstances as they choose to define them.

Applying this fraud triangle to harassment, the decision to harass may arise because the perpetrator is being put under too much pressure from their boss, or where they have agreed to deliver more than they can realistically achieve, and this triggers exploitative harassment of others as one way out of their dilemma. It could also be that they identify a weakness in a colleague which they decide to exploit for their own advantage. Critically though, using the fraud triangle, it is the *opportunity* to exploit in that particular organisational context which makes a harassment scenario viable for the perpetrator to contemplate in the first place and not necessarily a personality flaw alone. Thus it would seem important that the

workplace counsellor (i) is able to position their individual client work within the broader organisational context and (ii) is able to move in and out of that broader organisational overview as they make sense of the issues presented by their clients.

While this is no defence, it may be that in some instances the perpetrator may have some justification to exclaim that 'the organisation made me do it … honest!' And in the same way, some of those harassed may have inadvertently found that they were working in settings where harassment was endemic primarily because of the ways in which the work was ordered and in how, historically, that organisation has been configured. These are thus features and facets of organisational life of significance and relevance for the workplace counsellor to consider but ones that can easily be neglected, or diluted in significance, if the counsellor only maintains a client-focused perspective[4,15].

Moving ahead

Workplace harassment remains an emotive phenomenon, yet because it is person and context specific, it is difficult to hypothesise root causes and determination-generic remedies. To aid the remedial process, however, Buon and Buon[5] suggest describing workplace bullying as 'generic harassment' to reduce the emotional charge attached to the label 'bully' and to make it easier to look for the possible underlying bases for such behaviour in each specific setting. Reframing workplace bullying may pave the way for a different definition of harassment in the workplace and facilitate more extensive explorations of it. Viewing business organisations as inherently flawed *containers* also helps to move the debate away from the attribution of fault or failure of executives to one of seeking to understand, rectify and resolve the unhelpful dynamics experienced when harassment occurs.

Thus one of the particular challenges for the workplace counsellor remains that of flexibly and competently applying a variety of lenses through which to examine, hypothesise, illuminate and portray their client's expressed concerns. It is this multifaceted type of engagement – whereby the workplace counsellor is required to simultaneously use several levels of analysis of the organisation – that differentiates the workplace counsellor from counselling in private practice. Profoundly different from the provision of privately funded individual counselling, the workplace counsellor needs to be able to take account of the impact on the client and on them from the very organisational

pressures and dynamics that are being experienced as problematic by the client.

Given the complex interplay of interactions and attributed meanings in organisations, it is no wonder that workplace counsellors occupy a perilous position as they go about their work. For example, to whom do they owe allegiance, what is their role, what can they actually do, how might their 'success' and 'failure' be defined – and by whom – and what might clients and sponsors be looking for, expect and see as legitimate workplace counselling? How will confidentiality be safeguarded and what, if anything, will be reported back about the work, and the types of issues raised, by clients?

So is workplace harassment *generic* or a result of *context and conditioning*? Perhaps you, the reader, could decide! ■

References

1 Stoupe D. Workplace bullying. Counselling at Work. Spring 2009; 30-33.

2 Thomas J, Hersen M. (eds) Handbook of mental health in the workplace. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage publications; 2002.

3 Cartwright S, Cooper C. The problem of workplace bullying. The Psychologist. 2007; 20(5):284-287.

4 Campbell J, Cooper C, Gavin J, Quick J. Managing executive health. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2008.

5 Buon C, Buon T. The 'bully' within. Counselling at Work. Summer 2007; 5-8.

6 Walton M. Leadership toxicity – an inevitable affliction of organisations? Organisations and People. 2007; 14.

7 Walton M. In consideration of a toxic workplace: a suitable case for treatment. Kinder A, Hughes R, Cooper C. (eds) Employee wellbeing support. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Ltd; 2008.

8 Hughes R. CIPD conference 2008: workplace wellbeing. Counselling at Work. Autumn 2008; 12-16.

9 Puplampu B. Toward a framework for understanding the distressed organisation. Consulting Psychology Journal. 2005; 56(4):246-258.

10 Kets de Vries M, Miller D. Unstable at the top. New York: Mentor Books; 1987.

11 Jarosz A. Good counselling can't hide bad management. Counselling at Work. Winter 2008/9; 5-6.

12 CIPD. How engaged are British employees? Wimbledon: CPID; 2006.

13 Peyton P. Dignity at work. London: Routledge; 2003.

14 Turner J, Mock T, Srivastava R. An analysis of the fraud triangle. 2003. Available via: http://aaahq. org/audit/midyear/03midyear/papers/Research%20 Roundtable%203-Turner-Mock-Srivastava.pdf

15 Lowman R. Counselling and psychotherapy of work dysfunctions. Washington DC: American Psychological Association; 1993.