Women, bullying and the construction industry: Twisted gender dynamics in a male-dominated environment

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To the extent that it can be construed as harassment, bullying within the workplace is illegal (Gov.uk, 2013). Despite this, evidence suggests that the phenomenon remains widespread, and often proliferates in obscure and ambiguous ways (Miner and Eischeid, 2012). The Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (Acas) (2013) define bullying as “unwanted behaviour that makes someone feel intimidated, degraded, humiliated or offended”, with examples ranging from “spreading malicious rumours, or insulting someone, to exclusion or victimisation”.

We present a subject that has received limited attention within the literature: bullying between women. In fact, this paper focuses on workplace bullying inflicted on women, by women, but in a male-dominated environment.
It is against this background that we identify and explore the phenomenon at British Construction (a pseudonym) (BC). The following empirical data reflects the experiences described in the diary of a woman at BC (Tina, one of the authors of this paper). While such experience certainly includes the barriers to recruitment encountered, the emphasis here is on the specific challenges women encounter once working within the male-dominated industry. In fact, Tina was an employee at the company for 15 years and subsequently resigned following sustained bullying by a female colleague together with an employer that would not acknowledge its seriousness, or apply its policies to protect her in the absence of statutory law. On one level the story told in this paper will be one familiar to many of us: daily frustrations at work, resentment and self-doubt. Indeed, most of us accept such occurrences as inevitable. But on another level, the story reveals a dysfunctional behaviour which scholars working in the field of work and organization can actively help ameliorate. The narrative focuses on the phenomenon of bullying between women, and the cultural and
leadership mechanisms through which male-dominated workforces apparently facilitate it.

By way of analysis, this research uses the framework developed by MacIntosh et al. (2010). The framework suggests women typically experience workplace bullying through a four stage process. The four stages are defined as Being Conciliatory, Reconsidering, Reducing Interference and Redeveloping Balance.

Such bullying is here conceptualised as part of what has become known in recent decades as the “Queen Bee Syndrome” (Staines et al., 1973). It is seen to have a detrimental effect not only on those involved directly, but on the broader relations between employee and employer. Whereas the vast majority of existing studies on workplace bullying rely on survey or other quantitative data, we here impart a first-hand experience by means of retrospective autoethnography (sometimes referred to as “autoethnography a posteriori”; see for example Boncori 2013: xvii).

We go on to argue that, unaddressed, there are far-reaching implications for organisations, particularly in male-dominated industries. Organisations can mitigate this phenomenon by
raising awareness, providing training, establishing and maintaining robust workplace policies, and – perhaps most pertinently - by actively championing gender balance in hitherto male-dominated industries. Additionally, in reflecting on the findings generated we speculate that although the Queen Bee Syndrome implies superficially that women are their own worst enemies (see, for example, findings reported by Rindfleish, 2000), we argue that this phenomenon is deeply entrenched in behavioural norms, the parameters for which have been defined by societal forces more generally. Finally, we delineate recommendations to expand research in this area to encompass the experiences of other women, in other industries.

References List


