

**BULLYING IN SMALL TOWN SERVICE PROVIDERS IN NORTHERN  
BRITISH COLUMBIA: THE EXPERIENCE OF EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS AND  
PUTTING THEORY INTO PRACTICE**

by

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THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS  
IN  
DISABILITY MANAGEMENT

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN BRITISH COLUMBIA

April 2012

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395, rue Wellington  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

*Your file Votre référence*

*ISBN: 978-0-494-87543-8*

*Our file Notre référence*

*ISBN: 978-0-494-87543-8*

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### **Abstract**

This work is on bullying in small town service organizations from the perspective of executive directors. The literature review touches on bullying research and discusses theoretical lenses and the Salin (2003) lens that is used in this study. This is a qualitative study using a phenomenological approach. Data come from text of seven interviews of executive directors that manage organizations run by volunteer boards from Prince Rupert to Prince George, British Columbia. The significant questions were the utility of using Salin (2003) as a tool for focusing attention on important elements related to workplace bullying, the role of location, and whether theory operationalizes neatly into practice when it comes to workplace bullying. Five themes emerged: autonomy/loneliness, measures of success, communication, fear, not just a job, and a discussion of what did not fit into these themes. Discussion of the findings, limitations, recommendations and areas for future research are presented.

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### **Acknowledgement**

I want to thank my family, in particular my husband Albert and my son Anyon, who had to live with me through this process from start to finish. Mommy is no longer “on her thesis”, it finally hatched. It has been a trying few years for multiple reasons, but we are all through it better and stronger.

I also want to thank my supervisor, Dr. Henry Harder for sticking with me. I also want to thank my committee members Dr. Shannon Wagner and Dr Cindy Hardy. Thanks go to Shannon for convincing me to go this route at the beginning of my studies, and thanks go to Cindy for her meticulous feedback. Both of your contributions made my work so much better.

I also owe a debt of gratitude to the participants in my study, as without their interest and participation this thesis could not exist.

## **Introduction**

Workplace bullying is becoming a topic of increasing interest in the fields of Disability Management, Rehabilitation, Human Resources, and Organizational Behaviour. Workplace bullying, psychological harassment and mobbing are terms used to describe certain toxic acts within organizations that illustrate extreme elements of negative psychosocial environments, and may be indicative of violence prone environments.

Workplace bullying is considered an important area of study for reasons of law, costs to the organization and society, and of ethics. The inherent injustice of the workplace bullying situation is one where no society considering itself a moral and just entity should tolerate. The personal impact on targets is severe (Leymann, 1990; Leymann, 1996; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008). There is further evidence that targets suffering workplace psychological harassment are more adversely affected than targets of workplace sexual harassment: "...being the victim of workplace aggression is associated with more harmful outcomes than is being the victim of sexual aggression" (Hershcovis & Barlow, 2010, p. 886). This issue is one that can be very emotionally charged, as it can also be linked to devastating events in the media such as workplace shootings in Canada (CBC News, 2000; Macatee Report, 2003). As awareness of this phenomenon spreads, the ethical imperative to curb this behaviour within organizations becomes more salient and politicized. This is evidenced in Canadian society by the changes to legislation in the provinces of Quebec (Gouvernement du Quebec, 2006), Province of Saskatchewan (2007), Province of Ontario (2009), Province of Manitoba (2011), the Canada Labour Code (2008), and the final outcome of the Sulz case (Court of Appeal for British

Columbia, 2006). It remains to be seen if the interpretation of these laws result in real changes within affected work environments. The legislation taken from Canadian Provinces use the term “harassment” and clearly state variations on the definition as being unwanted behavior that a reasonable person would interpret as being unwelcome or psychologically damaging. Generally one common element in the research is that multiple acts of harassment must occur over time. One large difference between legislation and the literature when it comes to defining the parameters of bullying is that legislation accepts single acts while the literature stipulates occurrences over time. Another element that contributes to difficulties in describing the parameters of bullying is power imbalance. Employees can be mistreating each other, but if they are successful in defending against these negative actions then it cannot be said that bullying has occurred. It can be stated that the psychosocial atmosphere within the workplace is negative, and the risk for bullying to occur is increased. It is difficult for the law to make distinctions between what constitutes bullying and what is conflict or issues of normal workplace disciplinary practices.

Diligent research into the phenomenon can illuminate elements that relate to theoretical practice to recognize, remediate or prevent workplace bullying, but these theories are difficult to test in practice. Ethical considerations and confidentiality are two major barriers to this research, particularly when this research involves organizations that are located within smaller or rural communities.



## **Literature Review**

### **Prevalence**

In British Columbia, an 800 household telephone poll found that 28% of the respondents had experience with workplace bullying (Lorne Mayencourt, 2008), and in Quebec, the rate estimate is 1 in 10 workers (Canada Safety Council, 2005). Agervold's (2007) study results illustrate how a definition can make a big difference in determining prevalence of workplace bullying. Within this study sample results ranged from an overall sample population measure between one and twenty-six percent, depending on the specific definition used. When the definition is based upon respondents self labeling their experience as bullying, the prevalence rate is around 1%. If measures of observed negative acts are the focus then the rate is 3.3%. When the measure is changed from acts occurring weekly to 2-3 times per month, the prevalence rate rises to 26%. Lutgen-Sandvik et al. (2007) found the prevalence rate when self identified was 9.4%. When operational measures were used this figure rises to 28%. The measure used was at least 2 negative acts per week for 6 months. Yildiz (2007) found in his Turkish study that workplace bullying prevalence is 47 %. All of these studies utilized some form of a Negative Acts Questionnaire of at least 20-40 items except for Agervold (2007) which only utilized 10 items. This may be a reason that this study's prevalence rate of observed negative acts is 3.3%. Namie (2010) with the Workplace Bullying Institute (WBI) illustrates prevalence rates from 2007 and 2010. The categories measures are currently bullied, bullied in past but not now, and witness of bullying. The 2007 survey results show a rate of 36.8% of experience with bullying and in 2010 this measure is 34.5%. The tally for current, past and witness is 49% for 2007 and 50% for 2010. It is safe to

conclude that parameters of definition make a difference in prevalence rate. A further complication in measures of prevalence of workplace bullying is whether or not there is a requirement of the target to self label their experience as a bully victim. This illustrates the merit in stating that the stipulated use of self identification with this label could contribute to under reporting of workplace bullying as discussed in Lutgen-Sandvik et al 2007. Reasons that targets may not want to admit to ownership of the label of victim of workplace bullying discussed are a stigma of weakness or a lack of visibility of workplace bullying in the culture. It is safe to conclude that bullying in the workplace is a widespread phenomenon based on operational prevalence measures. It can be further concluded that negative psychosocial environments appear to be quite common, even if bullying in these individual workplaces is not specifically quantified. Salin (2003) reviewed literature on bullying and summarized the phenomenon which helps to clarify and illuminate the phenomenon from an organizational approach.

The complexity of the phenomenon makes it difficult for researchers to gain access to comparable data across studies with elements related to issues such prevalence rates, definitions, and antecedents among others. Cross study comparisons are further complicated when subjective elements are introduced. Limitations related to ethics and confidentiality further make studies focused on smaller or rural communities more difficult, which may explain why there is a gap in the research in this area.

One focus of this study is to gain insight into the phenomenon of workplace bullying from a smaller or rural community perspective. Other questions are related to the utility of using the work of Salin (2003) as a lens through which to identify the phenomenon, and help to focus on relevant elements within workplaces to identify and

define the phenomenon, recognize antecedents, the role of power dynamics, and resolutions or prevention of this phenomenon in real life workplace settings.

Sorensen (2005) compiled a Rural British Columbia Profile: A ten year census analysis (1991-2001). Within this document there is discussion of two different measures of rural. One being cited as McNiven et al (2000) discussion of Metropolitan Influence Zone (MIZ). The other is Rural and Small Town (RST), Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) and Census Agglomeration (CA) which are derived from population numbers gathered by Statistics Canada (Sorensen, 2005). RST is a population less than 10,000 with less than half of employees that commute into work to a CMA. A CMA is a location that has a core population of at least 100,000 and includes all neighboring municipalities where half or more of employees commute to the CMA urban core. A CA location has an urban core of 10,000 to 99,999 with the same commuting rules for CMA (Sorensen, 2005). These are sensible quantitative measures of rural and urban, and they relate directly to British Columbia which is the location of this study, in Northern British Columbia. This study is focused upon communities from Prince Rupert to Prince George along Highway 16. The largest community within that geographic area is Prince George. According to the Live Prince George website, the population falls within the previous parameters of a CA population in that the core of Prince George population is 71, 030 and has a CA of 83, 225 from surrounding areas. Sorensen (2005) stipulated that CMA and CA would be considered “urban”, so Prince George with a rating that falls within a CA measurement would have been considered urban in that study. However, in this study, Prince George was a location included in the target research communities as the focus is on qualitative experiences, and individuals who reside in this community may

not perceive themselves as being members of an urban community. The main focus of this study is on the lived experiences of the participants more than on quantitative measures based upon census data.

### **Defining Workplace Bullying**

One difficulty in a discussion about workplace bullying is arriving at an acceptable, descriptive, and measurable definition. Such a definition must encompass the scope of the behaviour and experience of the bullies as well as targets, be distinguishable from commonplace negative workplace behaviours which do not necessarily qualify as bullying, and be clear enough to gain an accurate measure of prevalence. Heinz Leymann (1990) is credited for producing the seminal research in this area, and his definitions are loosely used to study this phenomenon (Agervold, 2007; Yildiz, 2007). Generally, studies utilize some form of Leymann's definition which holds that negative acts must occur with a stated frequency and duration, usually one to two acts weekly and persist for at least 6 months in order to qualify the behaviour as bullying (Agervold, 2007; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007). Agervold (2007) stipulates the general framework of definition for study based upon the work of Leymann. Agervold followed Leymann's work in that the definition is distinct from conflict in that there are measures of frequency, duration, subjective experience, and escalation. Also included is an element of power imbalance in that it involves a supervisor or superior, or over time the target becomes increasingly powerless as the situation escalates. Hartig and Frosch (2006) discuss international terminology, and offer a further definition of 'mobbing'. They use mobbing to describe instances of workplace harassment as characterized by a single target being attacked by many: "the ganging up on co-workers" (p. 2). It is important to note that the terms

bullying and mobbing are often used interchangeably, and other terms may include 'emotional abuse', 'victimization', 'mistreatment', 'harassment', and 'psychological terror', 'personal abuse', 'psychological harassment', 'workplace violence', and, in some of the literature, may be covered under 'abusive supervision' (Agervold, 2007; Canada Labour Code, 2008; Gouvernement du Quebec, 2006; Hartig & Frosch, 2006; Leymann, 1990; Leymann, 1996; Namie, 2007; Province of Manitoba, 2011; Province of Ontario, 2009; Province of Saskatchewan, 2007). Saunders et al (2007) include discussions around essential and non essential criteria for definition. Elements such as types of behaviours (covert/overt) and effects on targets are classed as essential. Non- Essential elements include persistence, perceived power imbalance and labeling. Generally, studies utilize some form of Leymann's definition which holds that negative acts must occur with a stated frequency and duration, usually one act weekly and persist for at least 6 months in order to qualify the behaviour as bullying (Agervold, 2007; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007). Canadian governments place this issue under the umbrella of workplace violence. Of interest, some governments break with the literature by including single serious acts within legislation (Gouvernement du Quebec, 2006; Province of Manitoba, 2011; Province of Saskatchewan, 2007)

The definitions of bullying within the legislation in Saskatchewan and the Canada Labour Code generally follow the same pattern that was placed in the Quebec legislation, the first of its kind in North America. However, the legislation in Ontario, which is often cited as a response to bullying or psychological harassment, misses the mark for workplace bullying, as it stipulates a threat that must be in physical form. The definition of workplace bullying according to Agervold (2007) is:

...a social interaction in which the sender uses verbal and/or non-verbal communication regularly, weekly and for a period of at least 6 months that is directed towards the personality and self-esteem of the receiver. A person perceives or feels that he is being bullied when he regularly, weekly and for a period of at least six months, experiences such verbal and non-verbal communication as intentionally negative and as constituting a threat to his self-esteem and personality (p.165).

Agervold's definition clearly illustrates the non-physical form of threat to individuals who are targeted for mistreatment. The government of Manitoba has the most complete definition in that it covers repeated acts over time, single serious acts, misuse of power and authority, acts that threaten economic livelihood, undermine job performance, interference with career, adversely affect dignity, psychological or physical integrity, or results in a harmful workplace (Government of Manitoba, 2011).

### **Specifics of Bullying Acts**

It is important to discuss specific examples of harassing acts in order to differentiate and expand on psychological harassment from a discussion of stressful workplaces or aggressive supervision. The presence of stress in workplaces or aggressive supervisors does not necessarily mean the presence of bullying, particularly if the definition used specifies the target of the harassing acts does not self identify as a victim or feel they are at a power disadvantage. However, measures of the presence of targeted specific acts over time has been used by researchers to state the presence of workplace bullying independent of the subjective experience of individual workers. Sweden has defined acts of psychological harassment within their legislation as has the International Labour Organization, and in Canada the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS) ("Answers Page", 2008). They all use very similar examples. These include but are not limited to things like persistent criticism, abuse of authority, setting

employees up to fail, tampering with personal workspaces, ostracism, supervision with harmful intent, sabotage, impeding performance, gossip, threats, ridicule, constant change of work guidelines, removing areas of responsibility without cause, belittling by assigning tasks below job description or skill level, withholding information, shouting and verbal abuse, use of profanity, and subjecting an employee to offensive administrative or penal sanctions such as delaying applications for leave, training, or vacation (CCOHS, 2008; Von Bergen et al., 2006, p. 15).

### **Legal Issues and Human Rights**

Typical workplace psychological harassment or bullying actions are not based on any protected status of the target and are therefore not covered under Canadian Human Rights Legislation (Government of BC, 1996; Government of Canada, 1960, 1982). The Canadian Human Rights Act (Government of Canada, 1985) is the basis for discrimination law in Canada. The Canadian Human Rights Commission (2011) and similar venues for hearings accept cases based on discrimination protected grounds such as race, colour, national or ethnic origin, age, religion, sex, marital status, family status, mental or physical disability, pardoned conviction, and sexual orientation. In their definition of harassment they include threats, intimidation, or verbal abuse, and note that it can consist of a single incident or more incidents over time and that it can create a negative or hostile work environment. These acts within workplaces can and do occur but may not be specifically linked to the protected grounds within human rights legislation. Therefore these issues cannot be pursued under this legislation.

With respect to tort law in Canada the following cases are illustrative. Heeney (2007) discusses the case of *Shah v. Xerox Canada Ltd.* in which the court found that

resignation following harassment constitutes constructive dismissal. Humphrey (2006) lists cases in which significant awards were granted in cases of harassment. These cases include Honda Canada Inc. v. Keays, Rees v. RCMP, and Sulz v. RCMP. These cases illustrate willingness on behalf of the courts of Canada to enforce requirements on employers to address personal harassment in their workplaces.

### **Perspectives on Antecedents of Bullying**

An obvious question that arises from even the most conservative prevalence rate is what factors contribute to this phenomenon. Some researchers have focused on personality or individual traits of targets (Glaser et al., 2007; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002) in an effort to determine factors that contribute to a bullying situation in the workplace. This is an important element in promotion of understanding regarding this question, and great care must be taken in this approach as this line of reasoning could easily degrade into blaming the victim and stigmatization. However, it has been determined it cannot be claimed targets of workplace bullying display any set personality profile (Glaser et al., 2007; Peyton, 2003). There is discussion regarding common traits being the result of bullying, or traits being present previous to becoming a target, such as measures of neuroticism (Glaser et al., 2007; Leymann, 1996). This is a question that can never be definitively answered due to the nature of ethical research practices. Correlational studies are not able to illustrate cause and effect of bullying on the personality. In order to show workplace bullying causes personality changes it is necessary to take a reasonably healthy individual, measure their personality, subject them to workplace bullying for varying amounts of time and then measure personality afterwards for change. It would be irresponsible and unethical in the extreme



to subject a psychologically healthy individual to repeated and persistent abuse in the form of workplace bullying in order to causally prove the extent and causes of permanent psychological damage to the personality. However, it is interesting to note that Leymann provides some correlational evidence that prolonged exposure to workplace bullying can result in permanent personality changes (Leymann, 1996).

Other contributing factors that have been explored are related to management and supervision styles (Aryee et al., 2007; Bono et al., 2007; Harvey et al., 2007; Hoel & Beale, 2006; Skogstad et al., 2007; Strandmark & Hallberg, 2007; Takao et al., 2006), general cultural contributions on a macro scale (Hyde et al., 2006; Kelly, 2007; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007; Strandmark & Hallberg, 2007; Yildiz, 2007), or on the scale of industrial relations and general workplace culture (Hoel & Beale, 2006; Hyde et al., 2006; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007; Strandmark & Hallberg, 2007; Yildiz, 2007). Since experts in the field generally support the notion of power imbalance or struggle for power as a contributing factor in the emergence of bullying in the workplace, it is not surprising that much attention is placed upon the role of managers and supervisors within the workplace environment. Hoel and Cooper and Unison found that one in four cases of bully behaviour occurred between a supervisor and subordinate as cited in Hoel & Beale, (2006). A US survey found that 72 percent of cases were managers as the perpetrators (Fitzgibbon & Gervais, 2008; Namie, 2007). Much discussion is centered on the psychosocial environment of individual workplaces and the role of management to encourage or discourage a hostile working climate which fosters bullying behaviour. Common contributing factors related to management practices and promotion of a culture at risk of bullying behaviour include: ignoring conflict, lack of

clear policy on duties causing a scramble for power and increased role conflicts, encouragement of competition, implicit and explicit acceptance of bully behaviour, and poor change management (Bono et al., 2007; Hoel & Beale, 2006; Hyde et al., 2006; Kelly, 2007; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007; Skogstad et al., 2007; Strandmark & Hallberg, 2007; Takao et al., 2006; Yildiz, 2007).

There are studies that explore aspects related directly to the individual who performs these negative acts. Harvey et al. (2006) provide an interesting discussion regarding the brain structure of bullies based upon aggression research. They elaborate the discussion to include the aggressor's past experience, and opportunity. The majority of bullies are described as being opportunistic with an ability to read favourable situational cues on which they can then act. Harvey et al (2006) recommend management identify and screen employees to treat bullies in their midst, as well as prevent their hiring in the first place. This is a problematic approach, as argued in Denenberg and Braverman (1999), as they quote a specialist in the field: "...clinical research 'indicates that psychiatrists and psychologists are accurate in no more than one out of three predictions of violent behavior over a several year period among institutionalized populations,' whose past behaviour is well documented. There is even less chance of correctly predicting the behaviour of non institutionalized persons, such as workers" (p. 148). Therefore any screening tool used is at best a snapshot in time for prospective job applicants, and would therefore be even less reliable. The latter would lack a thorough background knowledge that is present in the case of the former. Although Denenberg and Braverman (1999) are discussing the violence prone workplace, much of the information presented is applicable to bullies, targets and workplaces, as bullying can be a trigger for

violence or even be considered as a type of workplace violence, as was posited of Pierre LeBrun in the OC Transpo case (CBC News, 2000; Williams & Sharp, 2003). Denenberg & Braverman (1999) argue that bullying can lead to violent outbursts: "...imagine being subjected day after day to abuse, hardship, or humiliation by a bully...each of us would resort to it [violence] if pushed to the limit" (p. 142). It is posited that an approach that has its focus on preventing a bully prone individual from joining the organization is an impulsive quick fix answer in that its appeal lies in its simplicity even if it may not be effective (Vu, 2003). Blind to problems until after a violent incident has occurred; the organization and the public may find it difficult to separate the bully from the bullied. There is some evidence that any individual can become the aggressor if the circumstances and related stresses are right (McKenna, 2004; Tepper, 2007). A more useful direction of investigation into solving this complex problem would be to focus on the organization itself, arguably the only place that has the power to remedy the situation. "Rather than hunt for a few supposed 'bad apples' in the barrel, we ought to examine the barrel itself, recognizing that violence is ultimately the product of social or organizational change and other factors that leave the working environment potentially volatile" (Denenberg & Braverman, 1999, p. 16). Indeed, the efficacy of management training programs to increase competence of managers has been questioned, as skill may not be able to be separated from individual predispositions or the context of behaviour (McKenna, 2004).

### **Perspectives of Bullying**

The Strandmark and Hallberg (2007) study, which looks at the origins of workplace bullying, provides an explanatory framework that synthesizes many of the mechanisms that give rise to this phenomenon. The situation begins in a small way and

then escalates. This beginning is rooted in an environment where there is “restricted participation, weak or indistinct leadership, betrayed expectations and unclear roles” (p. 335). In other words, the organization provides the parameters of the psychosocial environment. The presence of this unstable foundation in the psychosocial environment makes it possible for a values conflict between individuals. If management is unresponsive to these conflicts, then they become entrenched. Persons who do not mesh with hidden cultural norms risk being singled out for mistreatment. Strandmark and Hallberg were interested to note that engagement and competence were often cited as reasons for being singled out for mistreatment. The results of this situation often give rise to a power struggle, and if management fails to remedy the situation, both sides become more estranged from each other and individual stances become more disparate. This ultimately ends when one side is victorious over the other by managing to isolate the individual and begins the systematic bullying practice to gain/maintain power. If these contributing mechanisms as outlined in this work are accepted, then it is easy to see how things like poor change management, weak or absent leadership, lack of clear organizational direction, role ambiguity, role conflict and other associated workplace stressors that give rise to frustration can easily be viewed as a recipe for workplace bullying. It is also easy to see that the workplace itself is not only the key to giving rise to this destructive phenomenon, but it also holds the keys for successful prevention and outcomes.

Salin (2003) illustrates a very useful framework when describing the process of bullying. She utilizes a three pronged and interrelated conceptual lens which consists of three categories: motivating structures and processes, precipitating processes, and

enabling structures and processes (p. 1218). Motivating structures and processes is a category that relates to the organization. Examples in this category are internal competition, reward system and expected benefits, bureaucracy, and difficulties to lay off employees. Precipitating processes is a category that relates to external issues of which individuals and the organization have little to no control. Examples given are restructuring and crises, other organizational changes, changes in management or composition of the work group. Enabling structures and processes is a category that relates to the individuals within the workplace. Examples given are perceived power imbalance, low perceived costs, and dissatisfaction and frustration (p. 1218). Each of these elements are viewed as possibly necessary but not sufficient to the presence of bullying in any individual organization. Salin (2003) argues that if elements are present from some or all of these categories the presence of bullying within an organization is more likely. The work of Salin (2003) is very useful as it describes many contributing factors in the psychosocial environment of the workplace, such as structure, competition, power dynamics, change management, outside social forces, culture, and personalities of the individuals within the workplace. This fits well with other discussions of bullying that describe a step by step process. This model could prove to be a very good lens through which to examine the phenomenon of bullying or psychological harassment in the workplace. Its utility and success comes from its three pronged approach to bullying. It utilizes views from within the organization, from without the organization and individuals within the workplace. It serves to focus attention on elements and take a more holistic view of the organization. Using these elements could serve as a tool to identify

flags of risk. These elements relate to literature that focuses on definitions, power dynamics, change management, resolutions and prevention.

Lutgen-Sandvik (2003) describes six stages of bullying: initial incident, progressive discipline, turning point, organizational ambivalence, isolation/silencing, and expulsion/cycle regeneration. Hartig and Frosch (2006) discuss five stages from work from Davenport et al. (2002) based upon earlier work of Heinz Leymann. The five stages are: initial conflict; aggressive acts; involve management; branded as difficult/mentally ill; and finally expulsion. Earlier cited examples of bullying behaviour fit into many different stages which could be helpful in discovering bullying and help determine how to short circuit the cycle.

Hoel and Beale (2006) argue for a “less orthodox” (p. 239) approach to bullying. They place responsibility directly upon management and the organization as a whole. Imbalance of power is also central to their argument for their ideas regarding prevention and treatment of the bullying phenomenon. Their discussion centers on the UK public service, where there is high prevalence of workplace bullying. A reason for this is discussed as a change in culture resulting from a move from a public service orientation to a private sector orientation. In other words, there is a major philosophical change that results in the destabilization of the power dynamic, which falls under all three elements of the work of Salin (2003). The focus of this study is a sample in the UK public service at a time when there were cultural changes taking place, mainly the cultural change from a government not focused on profit toward a more for - profit private sector approach. They examine the change in working conditions and the resulting associated pressures from factors such as downsizing, increases in private sector - like performance appraisals,

coupled with cultural changes that reduce the power of unions, and change of the culture of management and traditional management controls. It is posited that management assumes bullying behaviours as a reaction to the cultural change situation in order to reestablish and maintain control of the workforce. This hypothesis fits with Tepper's (2007) research on how anyone can become a bully in the right circumstances, further illustrating the futility of using psychological testing to weed out undesirables. The argument put forward in Hoel and Beale (2006) is to distribute the balance of power more equally by encouraging unions to exercise their position in the workforce to alleviate injustices to individual workers. Essentially, the organization is the bully and individuals need to organize to rectify the power imbalance. However, this may be too simplistic an approach, which may do more harm than good. Denenberg & Braverman (1999) warn against setting up circumstances which encourage labour-management polarization, as often these situations increase risk of violence and do little to encourage mutually beneficial outcomes. The Hoel and Beale (2006) study looks at the issue from a macro conflict theorist perspective, which helps to explain the recommendation to look at power between management and employee groups within the workplace and not necessarily individuals. Other studies such as Strandmark & Hallberg (2007) focus on micro perspective in that the focus is placed upon individuals within the workplace. However, both perspectives suggest that poor psychosocial environments, no matter what their cause, can be improved with good management and organizational practices that are completely within the scope of action available to organizations. As Hoel and Beale (2006) work from a conflict theory perspective, an increase in union power is suggested. This may be helpful if the act of negotiating this power does not come from struggles

emanating from polarized entities which set up win or lose situations. This polarization does not contribute to positive relationships, but encourages conflict. Power and control rests with management, and ability to rectify poor psychosocial elements within the workplace also rests with management, provided stakeholder involvement is encouraged. Clear, firm policy initiatives would go far in preventing conflict and bullying, as well as maintaining vigilance when it comes to prevention. If warnings from Denenberg and Braverman (1999) regarding polarization are incorporated into the framing of a remedy by engagement of all stakeholders, chances of success should increase. This appears to be positive information for organizations that have an ethic of real commitment to the promotion of respectful workplaces.

### **Costs of Workplace Bullying**

Workplace bullying is costly to the target/victim, the workplace, and to society (Canada Labour Code; Court of Appeal, 2006; Leymann, 1990; Leymann, 1996, Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008). The target of bullying can suffer permanent damage to reputation, psychological well being and financial security, and runs the risk of being unable to participate in the workforce resulting in remaining disabled for the balance of their life (Leymann, 1996). Lutgen-Sandvik et al. (2007) report that bullying can “fundamentally threaten essential life domains (professional/personal identity, ability to provide for oneself, security of physical safety)” (p. 855). There is also evidence to support the assertion that other individuals within the workplace are adversely affected by bullying even if they are not the direct target of negative acts. Witnesses of these acts experience deterioration in their workplace environment and may fear becoming a target themselves (Harvey et al., 2007; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007; Rudner, 2007). Generally this can have



negative effects throughout an organization (Leymann, 1996; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Skogstad et al., 2007). Costs of workplace bullying to the organization include reduced productivity related to morale, decreased engagement, and severe damage to the company reputation (Hoel & Beale, 2006; Hyde et al., 2006; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007; Leymann, 1996; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Shannon et al., 2006; Skogstad et al., 2007; Yildiz, 2007). Leymann (1996) argues there is resulting costs to the overall healthcare system.

More societies are recognizing the associated costs of bullying to individuals, organizations and society, and are taking steps to enact anti-bullying legislation. Quebec is the first province in Canada, and indeed the first jurisdiction in North America, to introduce law specific to this type of workplace issue by amending its Act Respecting Labor Standards (LSA) to define psychological harassment (Canada Safety, 2005; Government of Quebec, 2005). Saskatchewan has amended the Occupational Health and Safety Act to protect workers from psychological harassment. Changes were made to the Canada Labour Code and the Province of Manitoba has enacted legislation to address bullying. This follows laws that have been enacted in Europe. Leymann, (1996) under “Effects on Society” from his online mobbing encyclopaedia discusses changes to Sweden’s Vocational Rehabilitation Act that came into effect in 1993 and 1994:

This law states that employers are obliged to present a vocational rehabilitation plan to the Social Insurance Office as soon as an employee has been on sick leave one month, or ten times within a twelve month period. The purpose of this enactment is to transfer costs for rehabilitation to the origin; the workplace where poor environmental conditions triggered costly consequences (third paragraph).

These measures recognize the power of the workplace to control and prevent this type of injury by requiring workplaces to bear a direct cost in relation to its occurrence (Leymann, 1996).

The goals of this study are to examine the lived experiences of individuals regarding workplace bullying and to test the theory of workplace bullying being an organizational problem. This study will examine the lived experience of individuals in workplaces located in perceived smaller community organizations in relation to workplace bullying. The second goal is to test the utility of the Salin (2003) framework in detecting the presence of workplace bullying within these individual workplaces. There is a further interest in how these organizations deal with workplace bullying if it is present and how the presence or absence of workplace bullying in these workplaces relate to the literature. This study will build on the existing literature because it has its focus from an organizational theoretical perspective on workplace bullying through individuals' lived experience in real workplaces. Studies of bullying have their focus on quantitative methods such as questionnaires, or approaches based upon surveys of self identified targets. This study is unique in that there is no specific focus or requirement for bullying to be present in the target workplaces, just risk factors for the presence of bullying. The aim of this study is to use the summary framework from Salin (2003) on workplace bullying to see if individuals in real life work situations could find utility in the framework that assists in defining, preventing or remediating the problem of workplace bullying in the participant workplaces.

## **Methods**

The purpose of this study was to examine workplace bullying specifically in workplaces located within smaller communities. One of the largest challenges in the workplace bullying research is the fact that information about bullying is mostly made up of data collected from individuals who self-identify as being targeted within their workplace. There is little objective data that clearly illustrates that these individuals were targets or if they were aggressors, or simply embittered employees who were unhappy with management practices at their organizations. Difficulties with the subjective nature of issues related to the definition of bullying, such as requiring targets to adopt the label of victim, complicate the study of bullying. Due to the nature of bullying, there are barriers to overcome to obtain objective data. There are difficulties associated with access to private personnel records, and ethical considerations related to labeling an individual as a bully or a victim. It was decided to shift focus away from specific organizations who reported issues with bullying and look at general service agencies within smaller communities.

### **Quantitative Versus Qualitative**

The obvious quantitative approach for a study on workplace bullying would be to conduct a survey with a validated instrument such as the Negative Acts Questionnaire (NAQ), as there is evidence of the utility and validity of this measure (Einarsen et al, 2009). It became clear that this approach has several barriers as outlined in Cozby (2001). These barriers relate to issues of sampling, response rates, and administration of the NAQ. As the focus in this study is on smaller populations, finding a large enough target sample would be problematic. There would be a possibility of targeting a large number of

individuals randomly based upon where they reside. This would provide a large enough sample size, but finding a list of persons who would meet criteria would be very difficult to obtain. In smaller communities, readily available lists such as phone book listings would not be useful as these populations have different mailing addresses from the physical addresses listed in telephone directories. Another issue with a quantitative survey approach besides gaining a large enough representative sample would be the information that can be gleaned with an approach using the NAQ. This approach would be useful in determining prevalence within smaller community populations, but it would be difficult to glean details that would illuminate issues specific to these smaller communities. So it was decided that richer data could be obtained using qualitative methods.

Another barrier to using quantitative methods in researching subjects such as workplace bullying in smaller communities is obtaining large enough samples of participants. Often the largest services and therefore the largest number of available participants are attached to very large organizations such as government agencies or health authorities. However, when these institutions were approached, they were adverse to participating in this area of research. These larger agencies have the resources to study this issue in house without having to deal with scrutiny from outside the organization. Due to the sensitive nature of workplace bullying, it is understandable why larger organizations would choose to forgo participation in such studies. This fact was a large consideration in choosing a qualitative approach as the requirement to obtain large samples is not stressed.

Therefore, smaller agencies located within rural areas that provide social services with volunteer boards were targeted. These organizations were posited to be more open to this type of research and this indeed proved to be the case. These agencies lack the resources of the larger agencies such as provincial government agencies or health authorities. If the larger agencies identify internal issues such as workplace bullying, they usually have resources to scrutinize their organization in-house, an approach that is beyond the reach of smaller organizations.

### **Selection of Agencies**

Social service agencies were chosen for a very specific reason: these are the services that are often under-funded in rural areas and there is a shortage of qualified individuals residing in rural areas to run these programs. A minimum of a Bachelors degree, and often a Masters degree is needed for individuals of these agencies to qualify for service provision contracts, depending on the service. These organizations rely upon public funds or grants. Accountability is essential for the survival of these organizations and their ability to obtain funds. Issues related to professional competence are outlined on the CARF website (CARF International, 2011). Accountability for public funds is a requirement and this is illustrated by the presence of organizations such as CARF International whose mandate through accreditation strives to ensure quality in service provision. This trend is further evidenced by requirements of individual professionals to obtain accreditation through professional associations. In smaller rural communities, the demographics of the population that hold necessary educational requirements clearly illustrate how small this population is in these smaller centers. For example, from the Statistics Canada Community Profiles 2006, in one of the target communities it was

found that of the total population of residents 15 yrs of age and above, 150 out of 1595 had a university certificate, diploma or degree; or just 9% of the population. This population is not specific to individuals who work in service professions, but includes every profession located within the area. The percentage of those individuals who qualify to provide social services would be even less. The issue of professional competency is one that has been clear in personal experience as a member of a Board.

One conclusion reached from these facts is that the only way to be able to guarantee anonymity due to the population size would be to target a wide range of agencies from a wide range of communities. Therefore, it was decided to target all communities between Prince Rupert and Prince George BC, along Highway 16. EDs that run agencies that provide social services with volunteer boards were targeted because the structure of these workplaces could be seen as a risk for the presence of workplace bullying. This is thought to be an accurate inference due to the ambiguities of power inherent in the structure and due to the stressful nature of the work performed. Participants were approached based upon those elements, but it was not assumed that bullying was present in these workplaces. It was assumed that if the work of Salin (2003) could help to predict presence of workplace bullying, then absence of the risk factors cited in the work and literature could be used as a contrast to illustrate risk or prevention in real workplaces.

### **Selection of Qualitative Method**

Once the choice of target organizations and qualitative approach were made, it was necessary to examine which qualitative approach would be the best fit for this study. The first approach considered was the Case Study based upon the work of Yin (2009).

The advantage of using the case study approach for this study would have been the information that could be gleaned regarding bullying in smaller communities in social service organizations run by volunteer boards. This approach could have included perspectives of not only those who consider themselves targets but also could enable inferences about the targets' identified bullies or harassers. This approach would have been useful to gain multiple perspectives on the subject of workplace bullying not only through personal accounts from individuals within organizations, but also with supporting documentation specific to the organization. Documentation such as grievance reports, personnel reports, e-mails, memos, history of the organization, past employees, past board members, policy manuals, and minutes of Board meetings. The critical element in the case study approach would have been to find an organization that was willing to be subject to such scrutiny as well as admit to experience with bullying in their workplace. Such an organization was identified, and permission was even obtained in writing from this organization's executive director as well as the Board of Directors. However, upon reflection of ethical considerations, this was found not to be a good method of study in this situation. Even with access granted to the needed data and written consent, the ability to maintain anonymity was determined to be extremely difficult, if not impossible due to the fact that the organization is located within a small community. Due to the delicate nature of the information that would have needed to be examined for triangulation of data, this approach for this particular study and subject could not be justified. Therefore, a different approach was needed.

Four other qualitative approaches were examined. They were Narrative, Ethnography, Grounded Theory, and Phenomenology. Narrative research was discounted

as again, the focus is on only one or two individuals and anonymity guarantees would be difficult. Another reason for discounting the Narrative approach is that workplace bullying is viewed as more of an organizational problem that does not fit neatly into an individualized story with a set beginning, middle and end. It was also posited that EDs are very busy people and it would be a considerable imposition on their time to require multiple interviews of varying lengths. Ethnography was discounted mostly because the demands of being present for participant observation of a group or wide variety of groups would be problematic. There were also ethical considerations due to the nature of work that takes place in social service agencies. Clients expect confidentiality and having an outsider present to see who uses the services of these organizations would be a severe ethical breach. Grounded theory was discounted because much of the selection process that went into choosing the target participants was already based on a previous framework. The interest was not placed upon developing theory, but adding insights into workplace bullying. Phenomenology became the obvious choice as the focus in this approach is on the lived experiences of individuals. Anonymity could be guaranteed by the inclusion of many communities and it would be a reasonable request of the time of an ED of one single interview to gain insights into their personal experience. Also, this approach did not need to stipulate the presence of workplace bullying. Therefore the lived experiences of individual EDs who did not experience workplace bullying would add an extra dimension in the understanding of contributions of why bullying appears or why it does not.

For these reasons, it was decided to use a phenomenological approach to gather information from semi-structured interviews with these EDs. A deliberate choice was



made to bracket personal experience and focus solely upon the content of the individual interviews, excluding greetings, rapport building or conversations that happened with EDs before and after recording.

A phenomenological approach informed by Maxwell's Nine Arguments for a Qualitative Proposal from Cresswell (2007) was used. The list of nine arguments are: we need to know more about; how can this be illustrated; we know little about; appropriateness of setting; appropriateness of participants; data collection; validation of findings; ethical considerations; and preliminary results. The arguments and how they relate to this study follows.

We need to better understand bullying or psychological harassment in real life workplaces. This can be illustrated by how Executive Directors (EDs) for organizations run by volunteer Boards view their organizational structure. EDs experiences within these structures could illustrate how the challenges inherent in this organizational structure do or do not conform to the organizational view of workplace bullying cited in the literature. It is generally accepted that an imbalance of power plays some role in the phenomenon of psychological harassment. Usually power involves the hierarchical structure within organizations which is usually comprised of workers, then levels of management ending with the higher levels having the most power. In these particular instances executive directors are in charge of everything that pertains to day to day matters, and the Board is usually not privy to this level of detail. The Board is ultimately responsible, but they do not usually have direct say in the day to day operations. This sets up an interesting dynamic of power in that the Executive director runs things and is in charge, but does so at the direction of the board whose members most likely have little to no knowledge

about daily operations. Influences on the psychosocial environment could depend on who sits on the Board and there is extreme variety of individuals who take on this task voluntarily. Directors may have differing worldviews that influence their decisions and the organization they serve. Union involvement in these organizations may play a significant role in the climate and power structure in these organizations. The challenges related to securing stable funding for programs is another factor to consider in these workplaces.

The situation may be further complicated by being located in small communities as there are extensive family and social ties between individuals and as such, Directors may be influenced by these ties and have a worldview that makes them unintentionally vulnerable to bias. Often it is unclear where the ultimate power would rest in these organizations, particularly if the workplace is unionized. Unions likely hold more power than these small individual agencies located so far away from larger centers. This could be a further confusion to power dynamics within these workplaces as employees performing daily work tasks may hold more power in practice than the Executive Director or individual or collective members of the Board. These smaller organizations often struggle for funding and this may result in competition with groups that provide similar services. In unionized environments, they may have difficulty meeting monetary requirements outlined in collective agreements. The community in which these organizations operate could have an influence upon the dynamics in the particular workplace.

We know little about bullying in these types of organizations in particular and in smaller or rural centers in general. Therefore the study recruited social service

organizations located within communities that are perceived as smaller or rural with a focus on psychosocial work environment in general and bullying in particular.

The setting and participants are appropriate for this study. These workplaces would seem to be vulnerable due to the nature of work, stresses on the organization, and have a heightened risk of leadership ambiguity. Workplaces that meet these criteria would be a good test to see if the use of the work of Salin (2003) has utility in real world settings. For example, how such organizations prevent or rectify these issues, and what role if any, does a rural location contribute to bullying. Executive Directors were interviewed to gain insight into their organizational structure or workplace, and how they define psychological harassment or bullying and how they resolve it if present. Participants approached were Executive Directors who run organizations located within rural areas that provide social services and are headed by volunteer boards.

The use of personal interviews to gain insight into individuals' lived experience of what it means to be an Executive Director for this type of agency located in a smaller or rural area will provide needed data to answer the research questions regarding bullying or psychological harassment in these settings. Analysis of personal interviews was posited to generate answers to these questions.

Findings were validated by identifying common themes from multiple interviewees and noting similarities and differences in accounts, and comparison of those who did experience the phenomenon and those who did not. This study posed no ethical problems as multiple organizations and individuals are recruited from multiple communities and individual identities, organizations and locations were masked.

Preliminary results did indeed support the practicability and value of this study by using the work of Salin (2003) with the application of this work retroactively to a known case of bullying.

### **Significant Questions**

Is the Salin (2003) model effective in predicting or detecting the presence or likelihood of bullying in these real world situations?

Does a rural or remote location play a role in cases of bullying in these workplaces?

Do these individuals' lived experiences echo the literature in terms of definitions, antecedents, power dynamics, and resolutions or prevention of bullying in their workplaces? In other words, does theory operationalize neatly into practice in real life workplaces?

These are the three main questions this study was designed to address.

### **Positioning the Researcher**

I sought to determine the lived experience of study participants while keeping in mind that research is value laden and that bias of the researcher is unavoidable. I have experience of working as an ED as well as being a member of volunteer Boards, all within smaller or rural settings.

The executive director experience helped to illustrate where to focus attention, and assisted with rapport building as there was a common understanding of the demands of this type of position. Being a member of the Board for agencies located in small communities, this also helped to frame the research. Experience of being on these boards helped me to gain insight into the structure of these types of agencies and allow an

understanding that would not be easy to gain without this personal experience. While these experiences certainly assist in formatting questions and avenues of enquiry, an attempt was made to bracket these experiences and focus upon the content of the interviews and perceptions of the interviewees. This was addressed by making sure that during the interview the focus was on the words of the participant. A deliberate effort was made to avoid providing any information before or during the interview that would provide my personal opinions regarding bullying. Past experience with these types of agencies was useful in establishing rapport with the interviewees, but the focus was on the opinion of the participants, not mine.

I have personal experience of being not only the target employee of bullying, but upon great personal reflection, can admit that power struggles in past employment situations showed experience as an employee that is guilty of performing negative acts consistent with bullying. This personal experience gives me a richer understanding of what possible feelings and thoughts may be involved when people act as they do in situations of workplace bullying. My experience as an aggressor was a result of frustration with dealing with disrespect, and unclear rules and expectations. Upon reflection I feel my youth, inexperience and ignorance of proper management techniques and knowing how to address my own frustration was as responsible for the bullying as was the lack of communication surrounding role expectations. This gives me some understanding as to possible reasons some may choose to act in a negative manner. My experience as a target allows me very clear understanding of how it feels to be under attack for no discernibly fair reason. These experiences give me insight from both perspectives of bully and target which in turn give me some frame of reference when I

examine bullying cases or hear stories about workplace bullying. I attempted to bracket, as much as possible, personal knowledge and focus on the experience of participants. However it is impossible to ignore past experiences, so the experiences of being an aggressor, target, member of a board and an executive director did contribute to the lens used to examine the data. I am human and I accept that crafting my lens involves my past experiences so these experiences contribute in some way to what catches my attention as being relevant, the crafting of my questions, building rapport and even the reason I am interested in the topic. The focus was on participants' meanings to use in interpretive enquiry to come to a holistic account of what it is to be an ED in small rural organizations. I also wanted to take the text of the participants to illustrate complex interactions that help explain the phenomenon of bullying or psychological harassment and its presence or absences in these types of workplaces.

Going into this process I was very aware of the fact that I have a certain biased view of how individuals within these types of workplaces would look at the issue of workplace bullying, the power structure in the organization, what would cause frustration, and perhaps how perpetrators and targets of bullying acts within the workplace would be viewed. The plan to address this bias was to avoid divulging my own opinion before or during the interviews with participating EDs. Then a *deliberate choice* was made to make every effort to bracket my bias and focus solely on the text of the interviews. Conclusions drawn from the data of many interviews were then compared to the individual interviews to ensure it was really coming from the text of participants and not based upon my bias.

### **Rationale for Using Salin (2003) as a Lens**

It is well understood that mental health issues and psychosocial determinants play a major role not only in mental health incidences of illness, injury and absenteeism, but also in physical injuries (Harder & Scott, 2005). Workplace bullying, by whatever term, definition, or prevalence rate used, is a particularly salient topic when investigating psychosocial issues within a work environment. A wealth of research supports the assertion that bullying is an organizational problem, in that many different organizational failures contribute to the presence of a bullying climate (Bono et al., 2007; Denenberg & Braverman, 1999; Hoel & Beale, 2006; Hyde et al., 2006; Kelly, 2007; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007; Skogstad et al., 2007; Strandmark & Hallberg, 2007; Takao et al., 2006; Yildiz, 2007). If respectful working conditions prevail, and policies and good management practices exist and are followed with buy-in from all stakeholders working in concert, then bullying cannot arise in that environment. The work of Salin (2003) which is a summary of the literature, could provide a useful lens in which to focus attention and observe the phenomenon of psychological harassment in real life situations. This perspective could be used to identify and synthesize information from many different workplace settings in order to better illuminate salient issues surrounding this problem.

The work of Salin (2003) is very useful as it describes many contributing factors in the psychosocial environment of the workplace, such as structure, competition, power dynamics, change - management, outside social forces, culture, and personalities of the individuals within the workplace. Since the work of Salin (2003) places the focus on an organizational view, and the literature supports the utility of an organizational view, it

was decided that the summary of the literature in the work of Salin (2003) would have utility in the real world settings that are the focus of this study.

The work of Salin (2003) was used to select the types of organizations for this study. The work consists of three categories: Motivating Structures and Processes, Precipitating Structures and Processes and Enabling Structures and Processes. The selection process fell under Precipitating Structures and Processes as this is the category that relates to these particular challenges in the targeted organizations. These challenges relate to the structure that is common to social service organizations run by volunteer boards. The fact that agencies were chosen without specifying the presence of bullying was deemed to be a good way to scrutinize the phenomenon using a Salin lens to illustrate subtleties in the interaction of the three categories. For instance, risk factors related to the structure of these workplaces was posited to be a necessary but not sufficient element to the presence of bullying in these organizations. Social service providers located within small or rural communities fit in the precipitating processes element of the work of Salin (2003). Specifically, they are prone to restructuring and crisis due to funding issues as they are almost exclusively funded through government grants, which are known to change constantly. In northern rural communities there are many First Nations Bands, and these Bands have been taking more control of the social services offered to their members, which affects organizations that do not specify First Nations as their mandate. Funding for social services provided by local Associations often have to work very hard to secure funding for their operations which sets these organizations up for risk in the element of precipitating processes of the work of Salin (2003). This was a common element that was found in these organizations. The



commonality was either funding changes or policy changes imposed from outside the agencies that are beyond the control of these individual organizations.

This study used the categories described in Salin (2003) of structures and processes as a lens to identify salient information in the study. Therefore the results may be descriptive of this theory in action in other workplaces. The work of Salin could be a useful tool for organizations to identify the presence of bullying in their workplace and identify where to focus remedial efforts. Scrutiny of the processes illuminated through the use of this model may further be able to expand on issues unique to smaller population centers, which is a gap in the research.

**Motivating Structures and Processes.** Bureaucracy is present in the structure of these social service organizations. The Executive Director (ED) is in charge but subject to a Board of Directors that is made up of volunteers who may or may not be knowledgeable of daily operations. Employees may have different views of where the power of management truly lies. It may be unclear if power is with the ED or the Chair of the Board. Small towns may have trouble recruiting qualified staff and therefore may have issues with employees but may be willing to implicitly accept certain behaviours due to a lack of qualified available staff.

**Precipitating Processes.** These types of organizations are often vulnerable in securing funding. They are often 'bare bones' operations that have to be careful as they are using public funds and may often experience crisis and struggle to juggle service provision and business needs. Turn over in staff and Board members may also be common.

**Enabling Structures and Processes.** Power imbalances may be present, particularly if it is a unionized environment. Small town connections between different individuals could affect power dynamics. There might be the presence of perceived low risk of negative behaviours, since they may not be able to afford to lose personnel. The nature of work and structure of the organization and funding difficulties could result in frustration and dissatisfaction of employees.

**Further Study from Salin (2003).** The Salin (2003) study suggests a need for more qualitative study as the majority of research to date is based upon quantitative surveys which may be missing important nuances of behaviour, attitudes and perceptions. This study was most focused on these attitudes and perceptions of individuals to try and address this gap in the literature to contribute to a more holistic view of the phenomenon of psychological harassment or bullying, particularly in smaller communities.

### **Participant Selection**

Participants were approached individually based upon their experience of running a social service organization in a small community that is lead by a volunteer board. These organizations were found by approaching known organizations and the use of snowballing when participants were found. Internet searches were conducted on communities along Highway 16 between Prince Rupert and Prince George to identify agencies that met the criteria and the EDs were contacted individually. Current or past executive directors were deemed to be acceptable as participants, but only current executive directors participated. All interviews took place at the EDs' place of work in their private offices. All interviews were recorded. Interviews took place within the

months of November and December 2010. Seven EDs participated in the study; and the interviews ranged in time from about an hour to an hour and a half.

### **Analysis**

Each interview was transcribed by the researcher, and then listened to multiple times. The plan was to read through each individual transcription, but it was found that nuances that related to things like tone, sarcasm and humour were not clear or lost in the transcriptions.

The process was the same for each interview. The first step was to listen to the interview in its entirety in order to gain a feel for the voice, tone, personality and overall impression of the interviewee. Then the interview was transcribed. The next step was to listen to the interview a third time and make note of statements that touched on the significant questions that guided the data collection. An example would be when discussion about rural or northern living came up, or if they discussed what they know about bullying or harassment. Then the interviews would be listened to again but with a sheet with headings and spaces for checks, and spaces to place individual responses to questions from the text of the interviews. The elements of the sheets were: three categories of the work of Salin (2003); Time at their position; governance versus operational model of the board; unionized or not; bullying present or not; elements related to antecedents, definition, power dynamics, resolution and prevention; main challenges; main successes; relationship with board; role of location in small community. The interview questions were the same for each individual interview, though they were not always asked or answered in the same order due to individuals' responses. Some participants spoke at great length covering many different elements from one question,

while others preferred to hear the question and answer. Elaboration was encouraged and participants were allowed to take the discussion in any direction that they saw fit.

The responses were scrutinized and the common elements were examined to identify similarities across interviews in experiences related to the significant questions that guided the data collection. These similarities were then examined to determine if any common themes emerged. The next step was to listen to the interviews for a fifth time to see if these themes were true to the individual interviews in that the researcher was not biased into making them fit. A sixth hearing of the interviews followed to look for things that stood out as being markedly different in the accounts. Then the differences were grouped together and similarities and differences between the individual interviews were categorized. These categories were used to answer the study questions. The final step of the analysis was inspecting the individual quotes from the transcripts to make sure that the wording was correct and in the interviewees' exact words.

A core focus of this study was to test the utility of the summary of the literature cited in Salin (2003) to predict or detect the presence of psychological harassment in real world settings. A further aim of this study was to contribute to data that is specific to workplaces that are located within smaller communities. The last goal of the study was to gather qualitative data to expand upon the available research to help illuminate elements encompassed within the bullying literature that relates to definitions, antecedents, power and resolution or prevention which are subsumed in the work of Salin (2003) of the workplace bullying phenomenon. The aim was to focus on the lived experiences of ED's to attempt to tease out meaningful insights into the phenomenon of workplace bullying in real workplaces.

## Results

### Themes

After the data analysis was completed, it was clear that five themes had emerged. These are: autonomy/loneliness, measures of success, communication, fear, and not just a job. A short discussion of each theme follows.

**Theme 1: Autonomy/Loneliness.** Many participants discussed the issue of workload and isolation. One stated: “[the biggest challenge is] isolation. Like being the only exempt person and having 80 staff, ... that’s hard. (Interview 6). Another said, “my biggest challenge is working alone and making sure your doing your job efficiently ... it’s lonely...”(Interview 5).

However, the flip side is that they enjoy the autonomy of their position, “[the ED is] still accountable because you tell them[the board] what’s going on ...you have a lot of autonomy and you can tell what’s needed and you can drive the bus...”(Interview 6).

It is bad and good ...at the end of the day you’re exhausted because ...you’re doing so much, but then that’s what keeps me going too. I don’t think that I could have it any other way. And if I did have another worker in here I would probably have a hard time ...designating some jobs or like handing it down ... I think that sometimes I am ... [a] control freak. (Interview 5)

**Theme 2: Measures of Success.** Two groups were represented in the data: those who had experience of bullying and those who did not. Of the two groups, those who had not experienced bullying stated that meeting their organizational mandate was the greatest success. This included keeping families together, bringing in services and making real measurable changes in their communities. Of those who have experienced bullying and come out the other side, they found success in fixing the psychosocial

workplace in addition to making a difference in the community. Both groups discussed financial or service growth as great successes. One obvious difference is that those who had direct experience of solving bullying issues linked these changes in environment to success in their mandates. One of the participants who did not have direct experience of the phenomenon could not see how success and bullying could both be present because it would interfere with their work:

there really isn't much of it [harassment or bullying] because our work can't get done ...if we can't work together as a team ... our clients suffer and if the clients suffer they get fired its simple as that...If there's any degradation of client service you're out the door, because I won't put up with that and neither would our Board... (Interview 2)

It can be posited that bullying can have a very detrimental effect on the efficacy of the agency as discussed by participants:

In the past year, the ministries, our funding agency... they would not refer clients to us. We were at that stage because of the attitude, because of the working habits of our ... [employees] at the time who are no longer with the agency. Our own funding agency would not refer ... clients to us and that was a very, very strong statement. (Interview 7)

The last quote shows vividly that presence of bullying can have a huge influence on the organization's ability to meet its mandate, and may threaten the organization's continued existence.

**Theme 3: Communication.** All of the participants discussed the importance of good communication. When there was board aggression communication issues were identified as the main issue, and when there was an employee aggressor power issues were identified. However, in both circumstances, communication was the key to resolution of issues. It was made clear by the participants who had to work very hard on improvements to communication that simply writing policy was insufficient. Education

and the ability to enforce the communication policy, which translates into role clarification, was a common element. This theme fits with the organizational structure and the importance the participants place on clarity of roles and expectations. Having a structure was not enough. Education, communication and understanding of the structure, roles and expectations are the vehicle for change. This clarity of roles and expectations is cited as the best prevention of issues in the first place.

**Theme 4: Fear.** The presence or absence of fear was an interesting finding. Fear took on different forms, such as the fear to speak out, the fear to challenge the status quo, the fear to make the change:

...well around the topic [bullying] I think people have been afraid to take it on ... I have found that wherever I have worked in the past its been something that people are afraid to deal with. Management is afraid to take [bullying] on. So that to me is one of the biggest issues, and I don't know if that s a Northern issue or I don't know if it's an all over issue, or what it is. But that is probably the biggest barrier to dealing with bullying is that people are afraid of it...its hard to name like I said. Sometimes the more subtle things are hard to put your finger on, and in unionized environment[s] we know that when we start taking... something on that isn't black and white, its gonna be a long haul...so that can scare people away, like I understand that, but we have to do it ... there's just no two ways about it. So that would be, I guess my concern is, that I do see that and even within the Ministry, within other agencies, I see that. You know that people are afraid to touch things ... it'll never go away (Interview 6)

I think that those type of situations [frustration from not getting needed help from the Board and protecting the staff from the problems at that level] do induce a bit of fear and stress obviously because you're... getting the pressure [the] stress from the board, and sometimes its really hard to walk in the next day and be 'everything's all great'... (Interview 3)

Conversely, in the two workplaces where the phenomenon of bullying or harassment was not present; the topic of fear did not come up. Relationships were clear:

We [board and staff] have a good enough relationship where there's none of our staff who would feel uncomfortable in saying 'that's a dumb idea' and that includes myself ...on the other hand...they generally listen to us just like we listen to them, so really...like I say they are a governing board but the governing is joint ... [its] definitely...very collaborative. We couldn't function otherwise I don't think (Interview 2)

One ED discussed the fear of predecessors to make the tough decisions that needed making, and it was inferred it was fear that made them avoid issues or put the responsibility of day to day matters on their Board:

For example, if [they] had to make a decision dealing with personnel issues ... [they] come to the board, and the board says go and do it. [the board has] ... taken that accountability from [the ED] so if anything happens ... [they] can always shift the responsibility...(Interview 7)

**Theme 5: Not Just a Job.** One common theme was the passion for the work that gets done in these agencies:

I would always work for not for profit with a board ...I don't know whether it's the structure of it as having the passion for the mandate of the organization. Not for profits generally come with a mandate to serve the public in some way shape or form, and that's generally what drives me is the mandate and the passion for the mandate. (Interview 4)

When conflicts arose, this passion for the organization and the service to the community brought an element of emotion that may not be present in other organizations:

I like doing this. I like doing the work because it's never boring. There's always a challenge of some sort and I also know that at the end of the day we've done something that has helped the community. It may not be a great big thing, it's just little things that made it a bit of a better place to live (Interview 2)



The passion for the job and the benefit to community could be responsible for elements of frustration that would relate to the enabling structures in the work of Salin. The extreme negative nature of the phenomenon of psychological harassment or bullying might cause the stress and frustration because it is so counter to the values that such organizations hold in common, "...to take pride in what we do. It is not just a job that we come in eight thirty in the morning and four thirty we leave. Offering services in small communities; people are looking up to us."(Interview 7)

**What Did Not Fit.** Of the seven participants, one stood out as being markedly different from the rest. This individual identified bullying and harassment as being an issue that was faced in the past, yet this person is not new to their position. As stated earlier, this situation fits with the Salin lens in precipitating processes. This particular ED had this experience at the beginning of their tenure. However, what is markedly different is that the issue was fixed quite quickly because the incoming new executive did not give credence to the accusations. So in this case it is interesting that a change in management did not cause the problem; it fixed the problem. Of all the participants, this one experienced change at the board level yearly, and this is also the only board that was not identified as a governance board. Board members in this agency are clients of the service, and handle all business matters such as funding issues and business operations; which is unique in this sample. What is also unique is that this particular ED is the sole employee in the agency.

Generally, this participant's experience fit within the themes, but with two exceptions: fear and communication. Nowhere in the text of this person's interview is fear alluded to or inferred. This might be the nature of the work or the nature of the

organization because the clients are the pool from which the board is drawn.

Communication was common in that the ED felt it was their job to continually communicate to the board about how the business works, but other than that, structure did not come out as a pertinent issue. Perhaps these differences are due to the fact that this was the only agency that did not identify as a governance board. Further study on this type of board situation may be fruitful in exploring these differences.

Another outlier that did not fit was one of the agencies that did not experience bullying. This particular ED was adamant that location within a smaller community played little to no part in the challenges or successes of their organization. This agency did fit with the study when it comes to making inferences about prevention of bullying, and in identifying risks for the presence of bullying. The presence of this outlier gives weight to the inference that location in a small community is not in and of itself a risk for bullying to occur; or a significant risk to complications related to bullying.

In all, three of the seven participants did not directly state that location in a smaller community had an influence on their workplace. One stated they had nothing to compare it to, as they had always worked in a small community. Another one stated that they thought it did not make a difference, but the problem could be with the definition. This individual was comparing two towns that fell within the target area of this study, and would be considered similar locations.

### **Salin Utility in Prediction/Detection**

Another aim of this study was to see if there is any utility in using the work of Salin (2003) as a tool to identify elements for a workplace to focus attention in detecting or preventing issues around workplace bullying. The experience of bullying, successfully

addressed and no experience were chosen as a first step of analysis because it was decided that this is a way to make inferences about how to remediate the problem of bullying in these types of workplaces. The presence of a union was thought to be a significant element as this was a factor cited in the work of Salin (2003) as it is indicative of difficulty to lay off employees and implies bureaucracy. Time at position was considered an important element as this relates to stability in the organization as the ED is the operational link between the Board and the workplace. This fits with the discussions in the literature that are focused upon management and supervisors within the workplace. Aggressors were cited as either Board members or employees as this is indicative of different processes of power dynamics at work in these workplaces. Although the literature supports the aggressor as the supervisor, it was beyond the scope of this study to include the ED as the aggressor, as it is very unlikely that an interviewee would self identify as a bully. Change in service provision and funding were separated in the analysis as the data showed these as two distinct precipitating processes.

The next step in the analysis was to examine the data to see if and what elements are present that fall under the categories of Motivating Structures and Processes, Precipitating Structures and Processes, and Enabling Structures and Processes.

From these results it appears that enabling structures and processes play a large role in the phenomenon of bullying. This conclusion was drawn as two interviews that had no experience with bullying were also the two that did not fall under that category. Those two EDs were very clear in that they take a proactive approach to issues with and between staff in their workplaces. This is the area where the organization has the most power to facilitate change. This may be a key link in how the organization produces and

enforces the rules of behaviour. In workplaces where bullying was present, this was the element that was cited as the solution to the presence of the phenomenon. On page 1218 of Salin (2003) *Enabling Structures* contains: “perceived power imbalance, low perceived costs and dissatisfaction and frustration”. Within the two workplaces that have no experience with bullying, there is a cost to disruption of the workplace caused by bullying acts. These two EDs that had no experience with bullying do not allow the behavior. This is enforced through the structure of the organization and communication of rules and written expectations of everyone associated with the workplace, up to and including the members of the Board. Of the five workplaces that have experience with bullying, three stated bullying was no longer an issue in their workplaces. Two of these stated the way bullying was addressed was through making rules of conduct and communication very clear. Costs of negative behavior was very high, in that in both of these workplaces the bullying employee was removed when they did not conform to the written and stipulated rules of the workplace. In the last case where bullying was no longer a problem, the bully left the board. In this organization a high level of attrition at the board level is normal as the service provided by this organization is time limited, so when the time is up, the board members move on. The last two EDs who are in process of working through their bullying issues are instituting changes to structure, communication and expectations around behavior. They are trying to raise the perceived cost of performing negative bullying behaviours within their workplaces.

This model was used to identify a target group that would be prone to experiencing the phenomenon of psychological harassment or bullying in the workplace. Of the seven interviews only two did not have any experience with the phenomenon. Of

the five that did have experience with bullying, three have dealt with the issues and do not identify this as a current problem, and two are in process of dealing with the issues.

As expected, the model fit quite closely with the precipitating processes, as these were part of the selection process and the criteria used to select the target group. As hypothesized, every participant identified restructuring, crisis, and organizational changes as constants in their workplaces. The text from the participants discusses these precipitating processes:

It's stressful ...and it's all because of all the challenges you have to deal with and you think you've got everything going where you want it and then the Ministries change their mind and they're doing something else and you start all over again... (Interview 1)

I would say that the biggest challenge is dealing with staff issues that do come up and its not just about those kind of conflicts [harassment or bullying] it's a lot of issues that have to do with everything from the change in a lot of the work we do is with the provincial government and changes in policies some of the services we deliver we don't have any control of this here coming out of Victoria ... they don't really know their butts from their elbow when it comes to small communities and they can make policy changes...that have serious, serious effects on people in small communities and they don't seem to get it they just don't seem to care ...(Interview 2)

This supports the earlier assertion that precipitating processes are necessary but not sufficient to the presence of bullying in the workplace. The preceding quotes are both from the EDs who have no experience with bullying in their workplaces. The two participants who did not have experience of bullying in their workplaces were the same two that have held their positions for 17 and 20 years. One of them was present at the inception of their organization in their community. It seems that these types of organizations are particularly vulnerable to bullying when a new executive director comes along, or when there are major changes at the board level. This fits within the

Salin work as change at the ED level could be the catalyst that exposes the organization to all three categories of risk. This is echoed in the statement made by one of the ED's who has had no experience with the phenomenon, "...it would be hard for somebody to walk into my position and take it over without a lot of work..." (Interview 1).

Four of the other participants had been in their position for less than 5 years, and the last has been in their position for 8 years and they had experience with bullying at the beginning of their time at their job. In the last case natural attrition at the board level solved the problem. The two EDs that actively solved their issues with bullying did so by making structural changes and both stated these changes took years. In both cases the EDs noticed that bullying was a problem from the time they took their positions and that half of their entire time at the position was what it took to rectify the problem of bullying. The ED who was at their position for four and a half years stated it took three years to rectify the situation. The other was at their position for 3 years and it took one and a half years to address the issue of bullying. In both these cases half or more of their tenure at their position was taken up addressing the problem of bullying and making needed changes to transform the culture of their organizations. The last two EDs that have current problems with workplace bullying were at their positions for one year and the other for three years. All five EDs that have experience with workplace bullying are relatively new to their positions, except for one and this ED states that bullying was present only at the beginning of their time at their position. This fact appears to be significant, as it would appear that whenever there is a new executive director in these organizations, there is an increase of risk for this phenomenon to occur, or at least be recognized. The support for this inference is related to the key role of the ED in these

organizations and relates to their discussions surrounding structure and communication.

The ED is the link between the organization and the Board, so when there is a new ED, it interrupts the communication of the organization.

The motivating structures part of the Salin model helps illustrate other elements of the phenomenon of psychological harassment or bullying. It was useful to examine the individual workplaces to identify elements that illustrate how motivation to harass or bully could be beneficial in some workplaces and not others. Of the five participants who identified harassment or bullying as a problem, three identified employees as the aggressors, and two identified Board members as aggressors. In the cases of employee aggressors, rewards and benefits of the behaviour were identified by the ED's. One participant said:

They always needed something in their power or their control or their arsenal if I may use the word, to blame someone. To blame the employer to blame the employees, the funding agency because [if] the problems are solved they don't have anybody to blame then everybody will be expected to perform to their full potential...and when you blame someone then you shift the responsibility 'I could not do this because of this' ... they lacked the ability to do their job and that's why they always wanted ... to have the boogey man... that for years they felt that were hindering their ability to do their job (Interview 7)

The EDs were very specific in the belief that the aggressor employees had something to gain.

In the two cases where issues were with the Board, rewards and benefits to board members were not so clear. What is common to the two cases is that both participants identified communication issues and understanding of the organizational structure as being the root of their problems with their board members.

... its more of a communication than it is you know trying to harass somebody ...I think that there is some of that that happens in an inadvertent way...they're not understanding roles and sometimes not understanding their own role and perhaps having unrealistic goals at times... to be in the meeting saying you should have done this or it would have been better done that way or didn't you think of this those kinds of things maybe I...call it harassment but sort of like in a bullying manner like you didn't show up to two board meetings now this event didn't go well and you want to tell me its because I didn't do this and this which is the wrong...approach (Interview 3)

...it was my instinct 'ok something's going on here' but nothing was said to me. So I just didn't put too much to it... And then ... the new executive was coming forth and I'm hearing all this stuff about me; accusations; and it was like...a stab in the back (Interview 5)

Of all the participants, three managed in a unionized environment. It could be posited that the presence of a union would be a good predictor of bureaucracy and increased difficulties in laying-off employees as discussed in the work of Salin (2003); yet this was not the case. One of the participants who did not identify the phenomenon as an issue is unionized. Of the five that identified the phenomenon as an issue, only two are a union environment. Further, the two who stated they have managed the problem, one is a union environment and one is not. Based upon these findings, union involvement is not a good predictor of difficulties in remediation of the issue. The participant who works with a union stated it took approximately three years to achieve the desired change in their workplace. The participant who does not have a union to work with stated three years into their tenure they still actively manage the issue, as it was their belief that these types of issues are never solved, but managed, which is how they defined success in eliminating the issue in their workplace. In all three cases where employees were identified as the aggressor, those staff were removed from the workplace. Difficulties relating to the removal of employees was not related to unions, though where present the



union did play a role. The participants cited difficulties that were related to dealing with the community. Complications to lay-off workers in these work environments were associated with issues like recruitment of competent employees or volunteers because of the smaller size of the community, and the smaller size of the organization. In one instance where bullying was not present, the union agreement was cited as being a major obstacle in recruitment: “if you are anywhere that [is subject to] our collective agreement you have to hire accordingly ...that’s our biggest challenge” (Interview 1).

Participants’ discussion illustrates the influence of their community on their difficulties: “I just cannot go and out on the street and grab the next person to come and provide the ...services because we live in a small community...” (Interview 7).

...being non profit your wages are less than like Northern Health or Ministry of Children and Families... its just the way it is... Or even the School District so that it is harder to recruit... I don’t think it would be like that in [larger center] I don’t think it’s that difficult to recruit in [larger center]...but again, you have more amenities... (Interview 6)

[the] challenges I think from a smaller community ... its just high competition ... I’m sure there is in larger centers as well but there may be other opportunities for partnering for new local sponsors; you just have a bigger audience ... recruitment wise is always a bit of a challenge ...when you’re kind of reliant on some of the same industries; its kind of difficult to get other people involved. [in a larger center they have] a bigger pool to draw from.(Interview 3)

Other organizational changes did help illustrate an explanation for why particular agencies became vulnerable. In one instance the agency had split from its First Nations roots, lost capacity and went through several name changes and continued losing capacity to other agencies, all the while going through executive directors as well. This example illustrates a great lack of stability. The agency is also unionized, and they are in process of working through their issues. The current ED has been in place for just over one year.

The only element of the Salin motivating structures that did not show up in any of the cases was internal competition, which is most likely due to the nature of the work being performed in social service agencies and the nature of the mandate of these agencies. They are not there to make money, but rather to provide community services, so it would seem that internal competition is not an issue. Further, the skill set required of an ED is markedly different than the skill set required to provide professional social services.

The most common change that was present in every agency that had experience with bullying was a change in leadership with the EDs as well as changes in their Boards, "... leadership with the executive, yeah in the last 3 years ... this would be our 4th president [and] all other executive committees have changed as well..."(Interview 3) All five EDs that experienced bullying but one has taken their position in the last five years. The exception has been in place for 10 years, but the experience of bullying happened only once, which was in the first year of work with the organization. The enabling processes section in the Salin model is most pertinent to the individuals within an agency. However, inferences can be made regarding the presence of power struggles between EDs and employees or board members.

[Using] very[subtle means] to exert pressure on the ED ...and then failing that they would want the board to come and discuss the relationship and the board sees 'oh what is this ED doing staff is on sick leave and services are being withheld and the funding agency is threatening to withdraw the funds. That is putting pressure on the ED to bend to the will of one or 2 staff members...a power struggle... (Interview 7)

They had an agenda it seemed like and they took it upon the next executive board that was coming on and it was them that came forward [with the complaints about service]... I was just kind of hit with it and it came out of nowhere. (Interview 5)

Dissatisfaction and frustration was also present in this section

... you could work 7 days a week all day long and never achieve what you're always trying to achieve... just always pushing forward... the drive and the pressure is never not there... I have to do everything all the time but I'm not doing anything well ...so [you]question whether you communicated very well cause you ... leave a board meeting and ...the point wasn't made or the need wasn't met ... thinking you haven't done enough... (Interview 3)

It seems the work of Salin is a good predictor of real life situations in workplaces.

It can help ascertain which workplaces could be vulnerable on different levels and in different areas. This framework could be used to illustrate how major changes such as complete turnover in management groups or the make up of the workplace teams could be a real risk factor in the workplace if there are risks present from the other elements of the work of Salin (2003). It certainly shows utility in these targeted workplaces. What was common to the two work places that did not experience the phenomenon is that they scored negative in motivating structures and enabling structures, and only one element in precipitating processes. The common element is restructuring and crisis, which was present in all the organizations. The Salin lens was successful in identifying different elements of risk to organizations for bullying.

### **Definition**

A very interesting finding of the study is that those who did not have any experience with bullying did not have a strong or clear cut definition for the phenomenon. Of those that did have experience dealing with this issue they had definitions, but all discussed how difficult it is to come up with one overriding, clear and encompassing definition:

Overtly ignoring people because that was the punishment of the day for them... I had one instance of outright threat ... nasty emails or behaviours to one another ...there wasn't violence there was just attitude and negativity ...sarcasm ...off the cuff remarks... trying to mentally challenge people, put them down...(Interview 4)

...long term kind of pressures, unfair pressures and realities to be put on people, like verbally, mentally, those kinds of things...(Interview 3)

...It's just so not blatant you know what I mean? It's hard to name sometimes ...there's some subtle stuff ...there can sometimes be dismissal just by facial expression, eye rolling you know those kind of things ...that is a piece of bullying, but I'm not sure what category that would come under but definitely that kind of stuff can occur...(Interview 6)

Overall, the definitions echoed what is found in the literature with the most common being isolation and silencing or social exclusion.

### **Resolution and Prevention**

Out of the seven interviews, only two did not have any issues with bullying. They experienced the same stressors that are common to all the ED's such as workload, policy changes in services from funding agencies or government policy changes and cited challenges with unions if present and other issues such as geography, weather, and travel issues that go along with rural areas. The main difference seems to be longevity in the position, clearly defined roles and expectations, and not having difficulty making the hard decisions and acting on them quickly to avoid escalation that is associated with harassment or bullying cases. This element relates back to precipitating processes in the Salin model

[when] there happens to be something like that [bullying] with staff or they have a problem with another staff person then we sit down and work it out...[it never escalates because]...I have an invisible talking stick ... so when I have the talking stick who evers' turn it is to talk, talks. The other

person doesn't...we always have one individual, you always do I think in every workplace, who thinks they should have their way...we just have to say 'do your work and get on with it'...you have to maintain respect with your staff (Interview 1)

Our number one policy is that if you have a problem with a coworker settle it with the coworker. If the two of you can't settle it then you come to me [but] don't come to me unless you've sat down and talked with the person. If you don't like this person's attitude confront them ... If you're not a confrontational person, get over it. Because you're gonna have to try to settle it yourselves. If you can't, then I'll get involved, and if I do, neither one of you are gonna like the solution I come up with. So better do it yourself. And it works. Not that I'm trying to be a jerk about it but generally once they know that they have to sit down and talk to each other they do it and ... generally speaking, get it solved. Its not very often that I've had to ... intervene ... it has happened over the 17 years but you know it hasn't happened a lot. (Interview 2)

It takes real commitment and courage to solve issues when they are identified; particularly long standing issues in smaller centers. Those who have faced this issue talked about having a commitment to make change and they understood it would take work and resources.

Sometimes it is very difficult for a newcomer to deal with staff issues especially staff that is long term resident of [the] community. They have rules, networks in [the] community, friends, family...so he or she ...would...prefer to go to [the] board to get the direction to say 'OK do this do that' so the responsibility is shifted...(Interview 7)

...a lot of people think that...when there's a situation of bullying deal with the two individuals or the individual or what ever it is but I think you have to do it at a systemic level. You have to address both not just the one instance. You have to address it systemically as well. (Interview 6)

We hired a third party consultant to come in that is a professional coach ...for ... a good solid year and a half. Every month we would do a couple hours workshop, we'd work on different ways of communicating, respect in the workplace, a number of things with the coach present and then we'd talk about it at the next session and go through another training, so it was a lot of intensive hands on measuring and monitoring the changes through

all of that whole piece of training. So it wasn't a quick one shot you know let's do team work workshop then not do it again. It was very continual and very, very much an expectation that change is going to happen and that with the skills being learned here will be applied in the workplace... (Interview 4)

## **Organizational Structure**

This appears to be the area where being in a small town is very different from a larger center. An organizational structure is a basic structure that is common in many areas, not just in community service agencies. What is unique to the agencies located in smaller communities are the ties that residents take for granted which have less likelihood of occurring in larger centers:

...the structure is its standard structure in any non profit... it is just that in small towns it becomes a little bit more challenging because...say...we have 10 directors they're all living in the communities, they are members of the community. Then we have 10 staff members [and] they are living in the community...one staff member could be the neighbor with a director or maybe ...friends of or even related in some cases ... They cannot differentiate between their personal relationship and their professional relationship. They feel that no matter what they [employees] do [they] can go to the director and they will get away with it and so that's what happened in many cases. (Interview 6)

There is agreement that a small or rural location is most problematic when it comes to board members and employees. Particularly if roles and responsibilities are not made clear:

I think that maybe more small towns some staff members have been here a very long period of time, much longer than I have and I'm not from the community. So board members have become friends with some of the staff, like there will be that kind of dynamic that I think is inappropriate. (Interview 6)

When I first came here the staff really thought they could all go directly to the board. It's been more enforced in the last few years. Part of it is the change of management, part of it is the change of some of the directors

and the board, so its gotten much more structured around the process of who you come to discuss issues with. (Interview 4)

This is related to the enabling structures in the Salin model as it could be posited to contribute to a perceived power imbalance, in that the ED may think they cannot manage their employee, or that the employee would not go through proper channels to resolve issues. The structure needs attention to make sure all the roles are clearly defined:

Its clearer now but I felt that I've had to take on a role of educating the board around roles as well...Instead of it being a process of ... you apply to the board to determine whether you're suitable. You go through a training phase. ...it was never really set up that way now it is... everything is clearer and upfront (Interview 6)

Overall, most participants agreed that ties inherent in small communities have a great influence in their workplaces. Yet, it cannot be concluded that this was the most important issue to the participants. While the accounts are peppered with references to the size and ties in their community, the overriding issue was clearly identified as replacing the unwritten structure and hierarchy. The unwritten rules need to be replaced with concrete rules and policy based upon accepted models and structures generally accepted for non-profit societies. This was a common element in remediation of the issues of power in workplaces, and a common element to the two agencies that did not identify bullying as an issue. Of the two interviews that did not have experience with bullying, both discussed how they had very clear roles and policy. Further, those who did have experience with bullying, spoke about the amount of work it took to institute policies and rules surrounding roles.

In spite of the differences, all participants have one overriding commonality. They all provide much needed and valued services to their communities.

## **Discussion**

### **Effectiveness of Salin (2003) in Prediction and Detection**

Motivating structures and processes is the element in the work of Salin that deals with the structure or culture of the individual organization under scrutiny. Literature on bullying that fits with this element is related to culture in the organization that rewards or condones aggressive or bullying behavior. This reward system is usually related to supervision within the organizations. The two supervision styles that are discussed in the literature as being most related to workplace bullying are laissez-faire and aggressive leadership (Hauge et al, 2007, Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Skogstad et al, 2007; Tepper, 2007) Rewards could result from explicitly promoting these individuals into positions of power, or rewarding these individuals with perks. This reward could happen implicitly by the organization permitting these behaviours to occur (Skogstad et al, 2007). These rewards would be tied to the theme of fear of taking on the problem, making change, or lack of will to define and enforce boundaries and rules. The Motivating structures and processes element also links to the theme of communication and boundaries, in that when these are explicit and enforced, the problem is prevented or solved. It also dovetails nicely with the literature that cites lack of strong management or laissez-faire styles of management or unclear rules and expectations in the workplace as risk factors for the presence of bullying or psychological harassment (Einarsen, 1999; Hauge et al, 2007; Skogstad et al, 2007).

Precipitating processes in the Salin lens serves to focus attention on issues related to bullying that originate from outside of the workplace or in which the organization has little to no control. The element fits with literature that cites major upheaval and crisis as



a risk (Hoel & Beale, 2006). Individual workplaces may have very little control over things such as crisis in the economy, or over individuals who choose to leave organizations causing management or workgroup changes.

The enabling structures and processes of the Salin lens illustrate issues that relate to individuals within the workplace. Enabling structures relate to literature that cites power imbalances between employees or supervisors and employees as an essential element in bullying or psychological harassment (Aryee et al, 2007; Einarsen, S, 1999; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006; Strandmark & Hallberg, 2007). It can be concluded that low perceived costs of the behaviours is a contributing factor. Dissatisfaction or frustration could be as a result of crisis or restructuring from precipitating processes, but it is placed in this category as it is a possible outcome for individuals. Dissatisfaction or frustration could also relate to other elements within a workplace that may be unrelated to precipitating processes.

When the lens of the work of Salin is applied to the workplaces in the study, it highlights elements about bullying which allows comparisons and conclusions about the phenomenon. Using the motivating structures element, five of the seven workplaces scored a positive. Under the precipitating processes element all seven of the workplaces scored a positive, while five of seven scored positive for enabling processes. Of the seven workplaces, two did not have experience with bullying.

When these two workplaces without bullying experience were compared and contrasted using the Salin model, the findings were interesting. While they both scored positive for precipitating processes, they also both scored negative for enabling processes. Where they differed was in motivating processes where one scored positive

simply because they are unionized and would have a greater difficulty laying-off employees. This finding suggests that simply being a unionized environment is not sufficient enough to place these types of organizations at risk. It also implies that difficulties with recruitment of staff due to the location of these types of organizations are also not enough of a threat for risk for the phenomenon. Even the combination of unions and difficulties with recruitment in combination are not necessarily sufficient enough risk for the presence of bullying. As these were also the two interviewees who had been in their positions for the longest time, it seems the keys to success in these organizations is stable leadership, clarity of rules and roles, and a willingness and personal ability to manage difficulties as they come up. In essence these interviewees were the opposite of a laissez faire management style. Time at their position could also mean that these individuals are suited for their position. In other words, they have the skills and predispositions that are compatible with these types of workplaces. Further study that targets individuals that have been in these positions for more than 15 years would be needed to confirm the validity of this finding.

Of the five that did have experience with bullying, there were positive scores with all three elements of the Salin lens. The interesting finding here is that in these particular types of organizations, the most prominent elements are all examples under enabling structures and the reward system and expected benefits under motivating structures. Only two of the five are unionized environments, and while this fact was cited as a complication in the resolution of the phenomenon in these workplaces, the responses of the ED's were not markedly different from their cohorts who did not have a union. However, in the motivating structures and processes, it was the perception that the

aggressor employees were very motivated to keep their views and power and control over the ED and prevent the ED from performing their duties as directed by their Boards.

Three of the five who experienced bullying were very clear that the individual aggressor employees were interested in maintaining their view and their position of power in the organizations. In all three instances the ED's removed their difficult employees despite the fear of change and the inherent challenges. The other two EDs that cited their Boards as the problem of bullying or psychological harassment, both shared the problem of massive change at the Board level. But they differed, in that one ED was currently in crisis at the time of the interview and the other stated that this happened at the beginning of their tenure many years in the past, and wholesale change at the Board level is what solved the issue. The other alluded to continued change at the Board level was a significant contributor to their issues.

### **Role of Location**

Generally speaking, it can be stated that a smaller location does play a role in bullying, but it is not in and of itself a good predictor of risk for the presence of bullying. During the course of the analysis it became clear that there were issues surrounding definitions of what each individual saw as a rural or remote community. There was an issue with some participants in that they had never worked outside of a small community and therefore had no basis of comparison.

The problem of a proper definition of a smaller or rural community arose out of the difference of definition from the participants. The target communities were between Prince Rupert BC and Prince George BC and any community along Highway 16. For example, individuals who reside in places such as Hazelton or Fort Fraser might view

places such as Burns Lake or Smithers as larger centers. Individuals who reside in places such as Prince Rupert or Burns Lake might view places such as Vanderhoof or Terrace as being a larger center; while most or all individuals in each of these communities might view Prince George as the 'Big City'. Or the view of all individuals could be that every town in the target area is a small town, which was the definition used in this study. It may be fruitful in future studies to explore these differences in viewpoint, and if or how these views affect bullying. Another possibility is to set a quantifiable definition of rural or remote communities that include measures of population or available services, such as shopping or healthcare/educational/recreational infrastructure. A further possibility is to specifically include the participants' definition of a small town.

Individuals who have no comparison of work with larger centers versus smaller centers are worth exploring. If respondents state that they have no basis of comparison, or are using one of the targeted areas as the comparison to a larger center, then a level of complexity is brought to the analysis. Of the seven interviewees, only one individual had explicitly had experience working not only in larger centers but internationally. This individual was adamant that there is a great difference between urban or larger centers and small communities. This participant is explicit in their discussion that they have experience in both areas. This individual clearly states that a smaller or rural location plays a key role in issues within these particular workplaces. Three of the seven interviewees classified target locations as being urban as they had worked in smaller towns and viewed the change to a different larger center within the target area as urban. Four of the participants had only worked in smaller locations so they had no basis of comparison to a larger center. One interviewee was adamant that location played little to

no role in their workplace. Of the seven interviewees, only in two cases was it unclear if the individuals had experience working in a larger center defined according to the parameters of the study. One was the individual who was adamant that location plays little to no role. Of the two interviewees who were most adamant on this question, each stated the opposite of the other in that one said rural/remote location plays a large role in their workplace and one said it did not. Of the interviewees who were comparing differences between communities that fell in with the definition parameters of this study stated there were no differences between rural or urban communities, it is concluded that the difficulties cited or positives cited could be attributed to rural/remote location. In all, the text of six of the seven interviews illustrates that location does contribute to the phenomenon as the interviews are peppered with references to location. Even in the interviews where a location was cited as being urban and it fell within the parameters of the study, those who worked in these cited communities did not differ in their responses regarding location. The single interviewee who had clear experience with both was clear on their opinion of location and it mirrored statements of the other participants, so it can be inferred that a smaller location does contribute to bullying in these types of workplaces. However, it is cited as a contribution, it is not sufficient on its own as a risk factor, but a complication or a contributor.

In essence, it can be concluded that a remote or rural location does contribute to the phenomenon for reasons cited by the participants. These reasons include issues that relate to clarity of roles and responsibilities and clear rules that are muddled in smaller communities because of close personal or social ties between levels or hierarchy within the organizations. This further plays into issues of power dynamics. There are different

levels of ties and supports that can bolster power of individuals which contribute to ambiguities of power and responsibility within the organization. These ambiguities relate to issues such as an employee's relation to a member of the Board, or when an ED is a new member of the community. EDs could be naïve of these social ties and be lacking in these social ties, which may serve to limit the management power that the ED holds.

### **Echoes in the Literature**

In general the literature surrounding bullying places focus on definitions, antecedents, power dynamics, resolution and prevention of the phenomenon. It is generally accepted that this is an organizational issue as this perspective takes in all the perspectives that are cited in the literature (Hauge et al, 2007; Hoel & Beale, 2006). The individual elements were what this study attempted to investigate qualitatively. There was interest in seeing if individuals in these workplaces mirrored the literature in these elements.

The literature is not always clear about definitions, and in order to study the phenomenon, researchers would often stipulate a definition such as Leymann (1996) where it is a certain amount of negative acts in a certain time frame, such as single versus multiple negative acts per week or month (Agervold, 2007). Examples of incidents of bullying or psychological harassment are used by researchers such as Namie (2007) which include verbal attacks and profanity, blocking promotion or limiting access to needed tools to do the job. Particular attention was paid in this study to focus on the respondents' definitions of workplace bullying. In this study, of those who did not have direct experience of bullying in their workplaces, the definitions were nebulous, and the interviewees did not have ready answers or clear cut definitions. These two respondents

also had difficulties in citing examples of bullying behaviours. The five participants who did experience bullying all had difficulty in coming to a specific definition, but were able to readily give examples of the behaviours. Examples included dismissal, eye-rolling, seclusion and mind games. Based upon this finding it seems it is best in terms of education regarding workplace bullying is to focus on specific behaviours or negative acts. These behaviours do echo the literature (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006; Einarsen, 1999). Discussion in the literature on bullying also cites the difficulties in stipulating a clear cut definition (Agervold, 2007).

In the case of antecedents it was difficult to come to a firm conclusion as most of the interviewees who did have experience with bullying were fairly new to their positions, so they did not have first hand knowledge regarding how bullying came to be in their workplaces. However, two of the respondents were clear that the issues they inherited were due to past EDs fearing to act, which relates to laissez-faire management styles (Hyde et al, 1982; Skogstad et al, 2007). In both these cases the individuals spoke to longstanding issues, and due to the fact that things had been that way for so long, it contributed to the difficulty in resolution of the problem of bullying. Another interviewee alluded to the fact that their aggressor individual was not reigned in early on and that the negative behaviour became habit and spread through the entire organization. In every case where there was experience with bullying, the common element seemed to be clarity of roles and communication. As a result of this finding, it can be said that the experience of antecedents echo literature that cites leadership styles and clear roles (Einarsen, 1999; Hauge et al, 2007; Hyde et al, 1982; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003; Skogstad et al, 2007).

Conversely, the lack of strong leadership and clarity of roles and expectations can contribute to the presence and likelihood of bullying.

The focus of power dynamics is also echoed in the literature (Einarsen, 1999; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006). The EDs who cited problems with employees stated that it was a power struggle with these employees. These struggles could be linked with change management, as where the ED identified the presence of bullying, it was at the beginning of their tenure at the workplace. One ED spoke about how they would have done things differently in hindsight, such as waiting a few months before making large changes in the workplace. These could have exacerbated the power struggles that were experienced. The two EDs who identified bullying as related to their Boards, were not as clear when it came to the question of power dynamics. This could be explained by noting that board members are not present for daily operations and interact perhaps once a month with the ED, so the ED may not have as much time to clarify the issue with these individuals. EDs with employee issues would interact with the employee on a regular basis, and so would have more information to form insights into the behaviours of the other individuals. However, in these two cases, clarity of roles and responsibilities and communication were common strategies to all the interviewees. Bullying occurred because these roles and responsibilities were unclear or unwritten. Incoming EDs would be at a disadvantage having no clear system in place, and employees might try to take advantage to gain personal power in the workplace. Board members might not understand what is expected of them, or perhaps the past ED had different expectations of the Board. If these differences are not communicated well, it could lead to issues that bring rise to the risk for workplace bullying.



All EDs who identified as having experience with bullying employees discussed how they had to expel those employees from the workplace. Or said another way, they won their power struggle with their employee. In all three cases, the EDs stated they had tried to work with the employees, but it would seem the differences were entrenched. All three tried resolutions such as hiring a consultant to mediate, illustrating an expectation that issues would be solved to move forward, and being open to beginning this process by offering resources to do so, and instituting training regarding workplace bullying. In all three cases it was alluded to by the EDs that their aggressor employees did not want these initiatives to proceed. This echoes the work of Namie (2007) in that the aggressors seem to have their own agendas and do not place the needs of the organization above their own personal agendas. One ED was very clear in stating that the behaviour of their particular aggressor employees placed the agency in jeopardy of folding. In these three cases, resolution had to come in the form of ejecting the aggressor employees, and the result was improvement in all three workplaces. Using the two agency EDs perspectives that did not have experience with the phenomenon, it is clear that prevention knits closely with resolution.

The two workplaces where there was no bullying present had many commonalities. It is from these two workplaces where elements regarding prevention of the phenomenon can be inferred. Both EDs had very clear rules and policy in place outlining responsibilities, and these were well known by every person attached to the workplace, from employees to the Board. Not only were these policies clear, they were followed in daily practice, and respect was maintained at all levels within the workplace. Both EDs had a willingness and ability to recognize issues immediately and act on them

accordingly. This is the opposite of the laissez-faire management style that was cited in the literature as a risk factor. The other commonality is that they both had been at their positions for the longest of all the respondents. These two workplaces could be at risk if and when the EDs leave the position. Particularly if the incoming ED has a laissez-faire management style, and the established rules surrounding roles and responsibilities and communication change drastically. However, if these changes are managed properly, then there is every reason to believe that the risk would be less or even absent. The position of ED is not for everyone, and this was alluded to by all interviewees. This echoes the work of McKenna (2004) in that while managers can be taught skills, these skills are viewed in context of the workplace and individual predispositions. One ED stated they did not think this type of job was a good fit for them but stated that they knew of individuals who hold their position for many years. That statement clearly fits with the work of McKenna (2004). Conclusions gleaned from the lived experiences of these EDs do fit with the literature of bullying.

### **What Makes a Successful Executive Director?**

Five themes emerged: Autonomy/Loneliness, Fear, Not Just a Job, Communication, and Measures of Success. When the themes are taken holistically, inferences can be made as to what makes an ED successful.

All EDs are 'take charge' kind of people. Of the seven interviewees, only one stated that they did not think that this type of job was for them. It was stated that they had learned a great deal about themselves personally, but in future they would not be targeting the same type of position. They did not enjoy the responsibility and diversity of workload, and the heavy responsibility for the varied myriad of tasks that are part of the

EDs job. One interviewee stated that they would not take on a similar position in future because it is a lot of work, and they felt they were too close to retirement, even though they like the work. Two interviewees stated that they would only search out similar opportunities. One stated it was because they liked being the one in total control even though it is lonely work. The other stated it was the mandate that drove them, and this type of position is usually the volunteer board structure. The other three interviewees also stated that they enjoyed this type of work due to the ability to make relevant change quickly, and to make a measurable difference in the communities they serve. Resulting from these findings, it can be posited that a successful ED should be a person who enjoys leading and performing varied tasks and who enjoys and is capable of managing a large share of responsibility.

Further, EDs need to be relatively fearless, willing to make tough decisions, and have a thick enough skin to handle the fallout. This is particularly true in smaller communities. This finding also relates to the members of the Board in that if they want to keep their organization stable they must have faith in their ED to make tough decisions. The elements were evident in all seven interviewees, but it was most noticeable in the individuals who were forced to make unpleasant choices and had to let go their aggressor employees who were longtime members of the community. Ironically, two of the three who had to make this decision stated that there was some feed back from the community that was 'well finally, thank goodness'. This was not the only reaction, but it was a prominent reaction that was taken from these two interviewees, in that the expectation is that the reaction would have been different.

The theme of 'not just a job' was not entirely unexpected. Individuals who choose serving community as a profession would naturally be drawn to these organizations. It was stated by interviewees that their organizations were at a disadvantage because of lack of resources in terms of recruitment, but they tried to focus on the mandate and workplace environment. This ties in with the theme of communication in that all seven interviewees stated that communication is critical to success. This was common to those with experience of the phenomenon as well as those who did not. It can be inferred that successful EDs are strong communicators and are able to blend different elements into their positions to facilitate good communication. One ED stated that they hired a consultant to draft policy and procedures, another stated they instituted this process and put it in place and that had solved many of their issues. Two who did not have issues with the bullying stated their policy and structure was very clear and that contributed to their success.

The measures of success theme was interesting in that the three interviewees who had experience with bullying as related to employees cited resolution of these personnel issues as strongly related to their measure of success. The one that had the issue with their board stated that a success was getting policy and procedures in place, or the infrastructure to better communication in place. Of the two that did not have experience with bullying echoed the others in that their great successes were the services they provide to their communities and the differences they make in their positions. Securing reliable funding sources was also a measure that was cited.

## **Recommendations**

These findings strongly echo the literature in that organizations that provide social services with volunteer boards are vulnerable to the phenomenon of bullying. However, it is impossible to list specifics of what organizations like this should do as each one is unique with unique sets of issues. These workplaces need to look at the risks and the themes to see if these match issues in their workplaces.

Organizations that wish to address issues of workplace bullying should focus in three specific areas to prevent or remediate the problem. The first key area is to focus on policy. Often in cases where bullying is present the policy either does not exist in tangible form or it is inadequate or not enforced. If policy is unwritten it is very likely that there are unwritten rules of behavior that are being followed in the workplace. Intangible rules need to be made tangible, specific and clear. However, simply having policy or writing policy is not enough. It is essential that an educational component be included with any policy roll out. Because the nature of bullying in the workplace is subtle and nebulous and can change depending on context of culture and individuals, everyone in the workplace needs to be informed about what constitutes a bullying act. Every effort needs to be made to ensure that everyone is aware of what specific acts could be considered as bullying. Everyone in the workplace should have the tools or the understanding of how to recognize bullying and they should be aware of what steps to take if and when bullying is identified. This awareness of steps ties into the last essential element of what needs to happen in the workplace to be successful in addressing issues, which is communication. Communication of roles and expectations of behavior is essential. Clarity regarding expectations and steps to follow and consequences is very important. Clearly stated rules

and expectations through policy, education regarding issues and elements of policy on behavior, and clear communication of how these are interpreted and implemented in the workplace setting should increase success in preventing or eliminating bullying issues within these workplaces.

The communication theme is where the Board of Directors needs to take an active role with their ED. Organizations such as these should be doing what they can to manage personal bias among directors. This could be accomplished by having clear policies on recruitment of Board members that address things such as relationships in the community, rules around conflicts of interest and what would constitute a conflict, and these could be tailored to each organization as it sees fit. For instance, it may be acceptable for a former ED after a period of time to apply to be a member of the Board, while in others, this may be very inappropriate. There should also be education and training for new members joining the Board. This should include information on the past history of the organization, information about structure, some understanding of daily operations, and what liability and responsibility means operationally for individuals who sit on Boards. Rules surrounding confidentiality must also be made explicit, and there should be rules surrounding how the Board removes other Board members or the ED. There should be clear policy and rules about how the ED communicates with the Board, and what the Board is expected to do to support their ED. This should help the issue of isolation of the ED as the Board must be supportive of their ED in order for the organization to function. However, there should also be a whistle blowing policy which should provide a check and balance of the power of the ED, as the ED is the gatekeeper of information between the Board and the Employees of the organization. The Board

should set clear policy that defines the ED's roles and responsibilities. If this is in place, and is enforced and effective, then the whistle blowing policy should be moot. But it would be important to illustrate due diligence on the part of the Board. There should also be clear policy that defines the rules of conduct for Board members, as communication is key to success and this should go both ways between the Board and the ED. Boards should also be sensitive to flags that would indicate the presence of the phenomenon in their organization. Examples would be things such as turnover or a large amount of illness or absenteeism among the staff. These flags could be made clearer to the Board if they utilize the work of Salin as a lens to scrutinize the health of their organization on an annual or as needed basis. It is best to manage the communication to prevent workplace bullying or to manage issues as they arise before they become problems. The Salin lens could be used to help identify risk and reduce that risk before problems occur.

The largest risk in these types of workplaces rests with the ED. Stability in this position is very important. If one of these organizations experiences too much change in this position, it becomes a real risk factor for the agency, as fixing the problem can take years. Board members need to be very cognizant of this issue. Great care must be taken to ensure that not only do they hire the correct person for the position, but they must take an active leadership role in making sure that the transition is handled properly. The perfect situation of changeover in the ED position would be having the former ED present to train and assist the incoming ED to understand their particular workplace. This is a recommendation particularly for workplaces like the two in the study that have enjoyed decades-long stability in their workplaces. However, this may not be possible, so then it would become an important task for the Board of the organization to make sure that

change is managed while the new ED is coming on board. The Board of Directors could do this by making sure that any communication structure is followed properly and that they give their full support to the ED as they learn about the workplace. Usually a Board has expectations of their new ED and these should be made clear upfront. However, if there is major change on the horizon, it would be advisable for the Board to do what it can to make it clear through the ED to staff that these changes are a result of Board expectation and not only coming from the ED. The ED should be supported to be autonomous, but it is the role of the board to support the ED if needed, or indeed, to make sure the ED is performing their tasks as assigned by the Board. New EDs need to realize that if there are longstanding issues they must take the initiative and make the changes as needed, but it is imperative to have the Board's support. This is particularly critical if the ED is new to the community and the members of the Board are not. It would be the role of board members to use their knowledge and ties to help support their ED. Not to take full responsibility for the decisions, but to understand why these decisions need to be made. The ED has a great responsibility and needs to have the maturity and a willingness to act. The individual members of the Board need to fully understand their role, responsibility and liability and act in the best interest of the organization.

If bullying is present in the workplace, it takes commitment and resources to resolve this issue. EDs and board members alike should be very aware of the need to manage the issue right away. If bullying is present, it means that there are serious issues within the workplace that can eventually threaten the viability of the organization itself. It follows that this is a threat to the community because there is danger of losing much needed resources. If this happens, then the whole community suffers. Service availability



in smaller or rural/remote areas is an issue that may not be well understood by those who reside in more urban areas. There may not be another group or organization that would be willing or able to meet the needs of clients who suffer from the removal of an agency's services.

If organizations like the ones that are part of this study want to be successful in dealing with or preventing bullying they need to actively manage their issues. The use of the Salin (2003) lens could be a useful tool for EDs and Board members as a measure of risk. If there are elements of all three categories, then management could take the opportunity to act before things become unmanageable. The Board should be aware of the laissez-faire style of management and avoid that style at all costs. These organizations are so vulnerable to issues because of their structure and frailty of funding sources, that they do not have much room for error. These organizations face constant imposed change. These impositions arise from funding sources that require reorganization or even elimination of services. The fact that these are imposed from forces outside the community is a common frustration. Having to experience major change impositions of policy and funding constantly is a major stressor in these workplaces. It is clearly related to precipitating processes in the Salin model. This fact clearly illustrates the need for these organizations to be aware of the other two categories as described in Salin (2003) and manage them closely. Roles and duties should not be unwritten, they should be explicit. This is particularly important if there is turnover at the ED level. It would be impossible for an incoming ED to manage if policy of the organization is unwritten, unclear or not enforced. Communication and management of the communication system should be a top priority, and all who are connected with the workplace should be aware

of and understand the communication expectations. In these cases it is better to have things be clear as lack of clarity can lead to issues. Specific attention should be focused upon the Board in that it should be clear what roles and expectations are made of the members of the Board. It would most likely be helpful to have a specific vetting policy for members of the Board, particularly if the agency has had problems in the past. A clear finding of this study was that it may be difficult for members of the Board to differentiate between their personal role and their responsibility as a member of the Board to the agency. Bullying is very emotionally charged, and even if the workplace 'solves' the problem or the ED 'wins' the power struggle, small towns are unique in that these individuals are still around and in the community. EDs will continue to have to interact with these individuals. Board members may feel conflicted because they may need to act on behalf of their agency, in spite of personal feelings regarding individuals. Board members and EDs need to understand and accept that resolving these issues will take resources and will be a drain on the agency until resolution is reached. Having clear cut policy that is understood and enforced at all levels should be invaluable to members of the Board, EDs and employees. Clear policy and clear expectations of individuals in the organization is a tool that can be utilized by the Board members individually to come to the proper decisions. Clarity of expectations and roles should to prevent bias of individuals within the organizations. This is true of unionized workplaces as well as non-unionized workplaces.

### **Limitations of this Study**

The specific focus of this study is dependent upon experiences of seven individuals. As in all self report work, there is no quantitative accounting for the veracity

in the reports of individuals. If other individuals related to these workplaces were approached, the findings may be very different. Employees or members of the Boards may differ in the view of the presence or absence of bullying, influence of location, structure or communication and policy. This study is limited to the views expressed by individuals who hold a specific position in these workplaces. Limitations also exist in the fact that these workplaces have a specific geographic area, they provide specific services, are dependent to a certain degree upon public funds and they are run by volunteers, so this research is very specific to these of workplaces. The sample size is extremely small so care needs to be taken in making generalizations to other similar organizations. These results offer insights into the phenomenon of workplace bullying. They are not generalizable to the population at large.

The use of the Salin (2003) summary of the literature on workplace bullying showed utility in these workplaces. However, it would need much more rigorous research and on a much larger scale to conclude that this is the best tool for organizations to utilize. The framework offers a quick, easily understood framework for organizations, but there are other measures available. Other measures such as more established and validated surveys like the Negative Acts Questionnaire (NAQ) or hiring consultant companies that will conduct surveys and provide quantitative measures of detection and remediation. Validation of the framework of Salin was not the intent or within the scope of this study. The utility lies in using the framework as a tool to help focus attention on relevant issues as related to workplace bullying, not to quantify the problem or as a measure of remediation. The framework is only a possible tool for assistance in finding a beginning point to frame the problem of bullying within the context of individual

workplaces. Another limitation in the study is in regards to making generalizations to rural or small town populations. This study is based upon the subjective experience of the participants, and therefore limits the generalizability beyond the participants of the study. One goal of the study was to add perspective related to location to the literature, not to draw conclusions about organizations and location which would be unrealistic in this case.

Every effort was made to identify and invite as many EDs as possible to participate in this study. Contact was made by approaching known organizations as well as internet searches. An example of the result of an internet search would be looking for community services listed on target community websites, visiting these organization websites, then making telephone contact and asking for the Executive Director. A snowballing effect was also utilized by asking participants if they had contact information for EDs that provide similar services in their neighboring communities. A total of seven executive directors participated and the total number of communities was five. Two of these five communities had two participants in each, while the other three communities had one participant. Saturation was reached when no other participants agreed to partake in the study.

### **Further Research**

Areas of further research could focus on issues arising from this study. One would be to compare these types of agencies by contrasting rural and urban agencies to see how large a role location plays in bullying. Great care must be taken to clearly define urban and rural and make sure that the respondent agrees with the definition stipulated in the study. Another avenue of exploration could focus upon employees of these organizations,

as this perspective was not present in this study. Of particular interest are employees who were removed from these organizations. It would be interesting to see if these employees self identify as targets particularly since the EDs are likely to identify these individuals as the aggressors. This could bring a useful perspective to the literature as most research is based upon self identified targets. This would further illuminate issues around definitions and identification of workplace bullying. Another focus that would be fruitful is to interview members of the Board to see if there is any similarity in accounts with the EDs, particularly around communication issues.

These workplaces do seem to be vulnerable to the presence of bullying simply due to the nature of the work and funding structures. If Boards and EDs experience the presence of bullying, it may be difficult to know how to remediate the problem, and there is a great deal of risk inherent in both action and inaction for this issue. The work of Salin (2003) could be a useful tool for the management of these organizations to help frame the issues and risks associated with the bullying phenomenon. If this work is used as a tool, it can provide a useful lens in which to focus attention upon the elements within their own workplaces. Once issues are identified, then all parties can work toward solutions. As bullying is such a nebulous phenomenon, tools are needed for organizations to gain understanding of the larger issues and understand the best ways to address them. With the right education and awareness, the phenomenon of workplace bullying can be eliminated to the benefit of everyone associated with the workplace.

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## Appendix A

### Participant interview questions

Would you please tell me about your experience running your organization?

What specific role does your Board perform in your organization?

What do you view as the positives and negatives of this structure when it comes to power dynamics if and when conflicts such as personnel issues, grievances, policy changes or policy enforcement, or interpersonal issues arise?

What role if any, do you think operating in a smaller/rural center plays/played in your organization's challenges and successes? Would these be any different in a larger center?

Could you please describe your relationship with your Board? What influence, if any, do you think these individuals have on the psychosocial environment of your workplace?

In the context of your workplace, how would you define psychological harassment or bullying?

Have you encountered problems of bullying or psychological harassment in your organization? If so, what did you do to rectify the situation? If not, what do you think prevents/prevented this issue in your workplace?

What are/were your most significant challenges as an ED?

What do you see as your largest successes as an ED and why?

Would you consider working for an organization like yours again? Why or why not?

Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experiences as an ED?

## Appendix B

### Consent Form

#### CONSENT AND INFORMATION FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS IN THE STUDY OF BULLYING IN SMALL TOWN SERVICE PROVIDERS

### Background Information

My name is Mindy Vandenberg and I am conducting research for a thesis in the Disability Management Program at UNBC. I am conducting a study that focuses on the experience of executive directors for social service agencies that are run by volunteer boards located within small communities. My research interest is in psychological harassment in particular and the workplace atmosphere in general.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose and goals of this study are to examine these specific work environments through the perspective of executive directors in hopes of better understanding how such organizations deal with psychological harassment in the workplace.

### Benefits of this study

The benefits of this study are to gain a better understanding of what elements within a psychosocial work environment contribute to or help protect against the presence of psychological harassment or bullying in general. It is hoped that this study will contribute

a view that is specific to the experience of those in smaller communities which is not well documented.

### Selection and Participation

You have been approached to participate in this study because you have current or past experience as an executive director running a social service agency in a small community, and can provide invaluable information to this study regarding the work environment of such organizations. Your participation will consist of an interview to gain insight into your view of the work environment of your organization.

### Confidentiality

Interviews will be recorded, transcribed and any identifying characteristics will be masked. All information obtained in the interview will be kept in digital form in a locked secure location and be destroyed after one year. The locked secure location is in the researcher's office in a locked filing cabinet and after the conclusion of the thesis, the information will be kept in Dr. Harder's office at UNBC in a locked filing cabinet.

Interviews will be identified by time and date of the interview. Community, agency and individual names will not be used. Every effort will be made to keep any information provided in the strictest confidence. Any and all information will be used for the completion of a thesis and may be used in presentations or journal articles.

Participation is voluntary and participants can withdraw their consent at any time without any reason given and all contributed data will be removed and destroyed. Participants are

not required to answer all questions. Only the researcher and the supervisor, Dr Harder will have access to individual responses.

#### **Risk**

There are minimal risks associated with participation in this study, and all efforts have been made to eliminate this risk.

#### **Consent**

By providing your signature below, you are stating you agree to participate in this study and that all questions and concerns were answered.

#### **Contact Information**

To obtain a copy of a summary of the research results upon completion of the study, contact Mindy Vandenberg at [vanden0@unbc.ca](mailto:vanden0@unbc.ca) or Dr. Henry Harder at [harderh@unbc.ca](mailto:harderh@unbc.ca).

Any complaints about this research project should be directed to Dr. Henry Harder at (250) 960-6506 or to the Office of Research [reb@unbc.ca](mailto:reb@unbc.ca) or (250) 960-5650.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_