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**The importance of an organizational perspective
in dealing with workplace bullying:
“We don’t take everything so seriously”**

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The importance of an organizational perspective in dealing with workplace bullying: 'We don't take everything so seriously'

Keywords

Workplace bullying – Organizational script – Bystander – Games in organizations – Transactional Analysis – Drama Triangle

Abstract

Bullying at the workplace is a phenomenon that affects many people, but professionals who work with clients one-on-one often think about it from an individual perspective. In this article, the author suggests that it is important to look at workplace bullying through an organizational lens and to regard it as a function of the organizational script. She suggests seeing it as a group game, with an important role for bystanders and that working on it from a systemic organizational perspective can help clarify the nature of the game. In an anti-bullying program for schools, interesting results have been reported when working from this perspective.

Tabitha Hall (2019) wrote an important article on bullying in the workplace using transactional analysis (TA) to provide 'a conceptual lens to assist individuals in understanding such behavior' (p. 33). After describing the profiles of bullies and targets, she used TA concepts to dive deeper into the practice of bullying. Although Hall suggested that bullying is a group process, she focused on transactions between two individuals, one-to-one counseling work and personal script, not on the process as an organizational one. I suggest that TA also has valuable things to say about this issue from an organizational perspective because workplace bullying occurs in the specific context of an organization. In this article, I use a more systemic angle of approach to focus on workplace bullying as a group game in support of an organizational script.

Workplace bullying

O'Neill and Borland (2018) wrote that in the United Kingdom (UK), one in every three people has experienced workplace bullying in his or her professional life. The effects on individuals were noted but often played down or discounted. The Workplace Bullying Institute (2019) offers information about the prevalence of bullying in the United States. In 2014, 27% of employees had current or past direct experience with abusive conduct at work. Mikkelsen, Hansen, Persson, Byrgensen, and Høgh (2020) studied research on individual consequences of bullying and concluded that 'many targets feel compelled to take sickness absence' (p. 181). Workplace bullying is defined as 'an on-going pattern of mistreatment from supervisor to supervisee, between colleagues, or even from supervisee to supervisor' (Rayner e. a. as cited in Hall 2019, p. 32). Although bullying can take place in the open, it can also occur covertly. It can be about the target's work (e.g. giving work that is below the person's abilities, spreading misinformation etc), the target as a person (e.g. ignoring the individual) and/or take many forms, such as threatening and intimidating acts (e.g. verbal and physical assault)(Einarsen e.a. as cited in O'Neill and Borland 2018).

In working in organizations, I have found that, although bullying can occur covertly, usually colleagues are aware of it at least to some extent. For example, they may smile when the

target is being mocked, they may act as if they do not notice when the boss offends a colleague, they blush but say they don't find it 'such a big deal' when a colleague falsely insinuates that another has stolen money. Mountain and Davidson (2011) wrote that if organizations ignore bullying, it will have repercussions for the entire organization, not just individual victims. They described the continuum from more subtle and tactical bullying behaviors to more outright and aggressive ones, emphasizing how '... every time the organization will suffer, as energy goes into survival rather than creativity and productivity' (p. 203).

The individual perspective: target and bully

As Hall (2019) demonstrated, someone who is a target of bullying can benefit from working with TA to explore the use of functional ego states, transactions, and life positions and that 'the concept of games can be a useful method for understanding the underlying psychological principles involved in bullying behavior' (p.36). The targeted person can develop options for enhancing his or her strength in communicating with the bully. TA can also help the individual target to see how the games he or she plays fuel his or her personal script and that these both stem from and reinforce the script. I would add that understanding the script circle (Weisfelt, 1996) as shown in figure 1 in a simplified version provides the person being targeted with insight into the self as well as options for new behaviors.

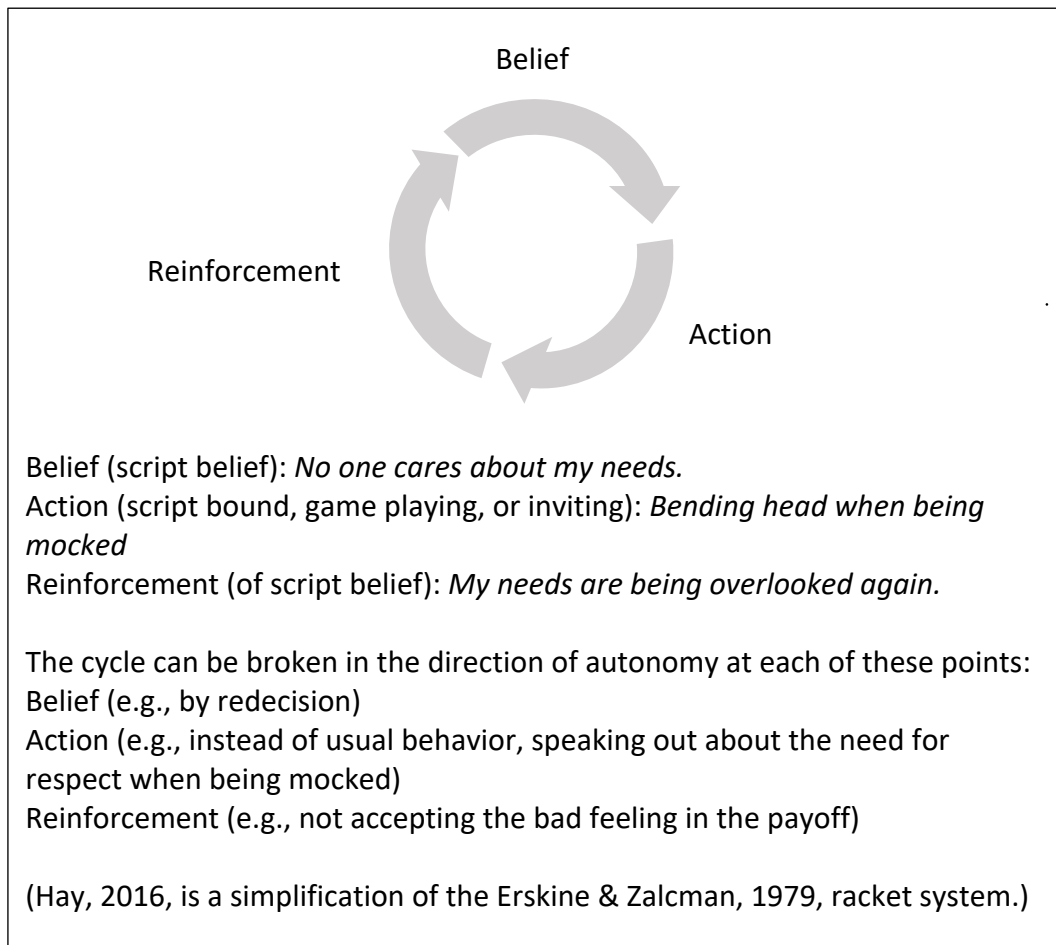
This individual perspective, however, is not the whole story. In a bullying situation 'it is often impossible to shift someone else's behavior by the target altering his or her own behavior' (Hall, 2019, p. 40). The Workplace Bullying Institute (2019) is more explicit: 'at worst a therapist who does not understand the effects a toxic environment can have on individual clients, may overestimate the target-clients' ability to reverse his or her fate'. In TA language, Summerton (1993) wrote, 'An overemphasis on individual dynamics can make individual clients responsible for group games. The focus on social dynamics offers protection against scapegoating one individual in a group' (p. 89).

The organizational perspective: the group as a whole

Organizations are (like) living organisms, as Berne (1963) noted: 'The fact that a group retains its organizational identity even when there is a complete turnover in its individual structure is similar to the process found in living organisms' (Berne, 1963). Similarly, Mohr (2012) wrote: 'organizations as systems reproduce themselves by way of their own patterns. [An organization can] stay the same, even though individuals within it may be interchangeable' (p.137).

This is important: A group is more than the sum of its participants. It is a system and has a life of its own that, on the one hand is lived through and by its members, and, on the other, is independent of the individuals who are part of it at any given point. With workplace bullying, almost as soon as one person is removed, another is found to fill a role. People say, 'It is all in the wallpaper', by which they mean the culture of an organization cannot be seen but does exist and influence the work. It is easy to find illustrations of this. For example, the financial department and the human relations (HR) department of a company find it difficult to cooperate professionally. Looking at the organization's history, it appears that many years ago there was a conflict between them. And although none of the current employees worked in the company when that occurred, they are not able to overcome it. Although each individual seems a reasonable person, somehow their groups continue in conflict.

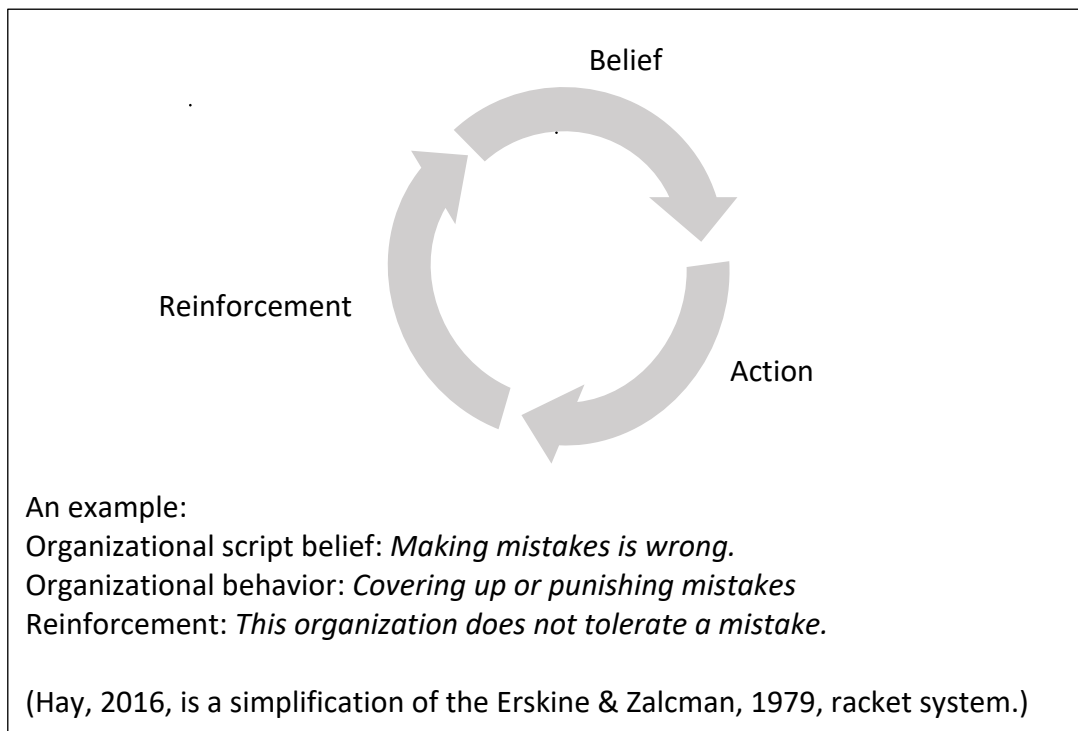
Figure 1: Example of an Individual Script Circle in Bullying (based on © Hay, 2016, slide 17)



When working in an organization, employees become part of something bigger than their individual selves. They become part of a system in which everyone is connected. Petriglieri & Wood (2003) pointed out that a person cannot enter a group without being influenced by it. To understand the depth of this idea, one needs to consider each transaction from a group perspective, by asking what it means that I or another said this at this particular time, at this particular place, with this particular configuration of people. De Graaf (2013) also advocated using a social orientation to understand behavior: Once an individual enters a group, the group enters the individual.

Whether we realize it or not, we are affected by the group as a whole and by the environment it provides. As an example, from my own professional life, I experienced different dynamics in working in one local government organization and another. In the first my creative ideas were highly valued and often came to concrete projects and results; in the other my ideas were seen as 'overdone', that is too visible, too creative. In these two contexts, I noticed a huge difference in myself with regard to effectiveness, pleasure in work, verbal flexibility, thinking capacity and self-confidence. Readers likely have examples of their own about how their behavior was influenced by the environment and by the system in which they were operating.

Figure 2: Example of an Organizational Script Circle (based on © Hay, 2016, slide 17)



Organizational script

Like human beings, an organization has a script, one that holds script beliefs about people, work, time and money (Krausz, 1993). These beliefs are often out of awareness for members of the organization, but for the knowledgeable observer, they can be detected through the behavior of employees and staff. The organizational culture can thus provide hypotheses about the script beliefs and existential positions that lie under the visible behavior. Berne (1963, p.110) applied the egostate model to a culture: the Parent is the Etiquette, the Adult is about the Technicalities and procedures, the Child is the Character. In the culture of an organization, the organizational script comes to life.

For example, when focusing on the 'people' component of an organization's script beliefs, Kraus (1993) wrote that the organizational 'I'm OK, you're not OK' position leads to 'exploitative, manipulative relationships and a lack of trust, respect, loyalty, and personal involvement with the organization and its members. It also stimulates competition among members, as well as between areas within the organization, disregarding the negative effects on collective organizational results'. On the other hand 'I'm not OK, you are OK' 'is marked by dependent relationships, feelings of inferiority, lack of power, and limitations on the amount of personal contribution as well as on the capacity for problem solving and decision making. People tend to underestimate their strengths and to submit to external pressure to meet the expectations, real or imagined, of others' (p. 80).

Figure 2 shows an organizational script circle of belief-action-reinforcement.

To the question of what kind of culture fosters bullying, websites concerned with workplace bullying suggest that bullying is prevalent in organizations with a strongly hierarchical culture, or organizations that are highly inward oriented. A style of leadership that is either too strict

or too informal and laissez faire stimulates stress at work, which also encourages bullying. My personal observation is that organizations with a poor stroke climate, unclear contracts, undeveloped thinking about roles, and strategies that frequently change are most apt to create a climate in which bullying prospers. Bullying is tenacious: When one target or bully leaves the organization, a new one is found. Mountain and Davidson (2011) saw a link between bullying and the abuse of power and said that in a culture with a good deal of teasing or banter, confronting bullying is difficult. 'If an organization is not dealing with bullying behavior, it is colluding with it' (p. 207).

Games in organizations: drama triangle and Bystander

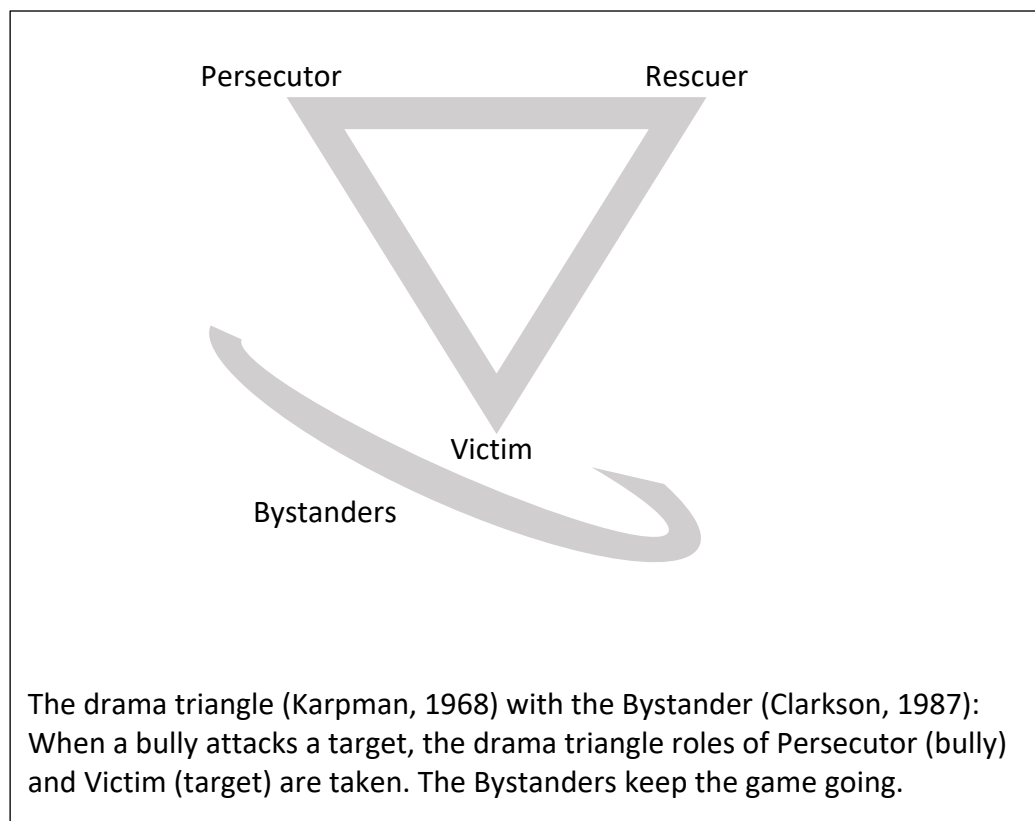
Human beings play games to reinforce their script. I consider bullying to be a group game in the service of an organizational script. That is, the organizational culture uses certain individuals for playing certain organizational games. Berne (1964/1967) defined a game as a sequence or series of ulterior transactions, repetitive in nature, that have a well-defined psychological payoff. Summerton (1993): 'A group game is distinguished by the following: 1) it is played repeatedly and as a matter of course by members of a group, 2) it offers rewards from within the group itself, 3) it is supported by the group culture, and 4) the technicalities of the culture provide the milieu, opportunities, resources, and justification for the advancement of the game and its payoffs. In addition, the etiquette provides guidelines as to what games are acceptable, and thus the culture provides a rationalization for the psychosocial aberrations that arise as a result' (p. 102).

The drama triangle (Karpman, 1968) distinguishes the roles of Persecutor, Victim and Rescuer, and some TA professionals work with other roles for analyzing games in organizations. For example Summerton (1992) described the Stage-manager, Sniper, Scapegoat, Spectator, and Savior. Napper (2014) found three more roles: Stage-director, Show producer, and Script writer. Although the analysis with help of these ideas may be even more precise, I prefer the drama triangle for discussing games in organizations, because it is so well known. However in the organizational context, it is necessary to add the position of the Bystander, to those of Persecutor, Rescuer and Victim. By doing so the systemic component is taken into account.

A Bystander is someone who does not become involved when someone else needs help (Clarkson 1987, 1993). In the case of bullying, the Victim (target of bullying) is attacked by the Persecutor (bully). Rescuers who enter the drama triangle quickly shift to either Persecutor or Victim. The Bystanders are the audience, they keep the game going by looking away and saying they don't know enough about the situation, by not speaking out, or by silently laughing and communicating nonverbally among themselves when they witness bullying by saying 'We don't take everything so seriously'. According to Clarkson there is no such thing as an innocent Bystander. According to Summerton (1993) games in organizations need Spectators.

In Figure 3, the role of the Bystanders as essential to games in organizations is illustrated.

Figure 3: The Drama Triangle in Organizations



Case Vignette: If it weren't for you...

A local government organization was reorganizing. Management had not yet decided on the future of the team responsible for taxes. The work they did might be outsourced to a regional office. The uncertainty induced a great deal of stress to the team.

Team members – aware of the upcoming decisions – had been doing their utmost for the last year and a half to prove their professionalism and legitimacy. They had been worked extra hours and taken courses outside of work time and at their own expense to keep up to date. By showing their cooperation (and more), they hoped to avert outsourcing.

When the team leader gathered courage to contact senior management and share the team's worries, he received a short answer 'we will decide when we decide'. At the psychological level, the team leader understood the message as 'do not to attract too much attention, for your own good and for the good of your team'.

A junior employee of the team was responsible for the support of the team in many ways. He has successfully been working there for a year. In the period of turbulence his workload became too heavy for the hours of his employment contract, but as a loyal team member, he did not complain. Then one day, when there was no coffee in stock, because he had forgotten to order it, he ran to the closest shop to purchase some. Two colleagues notably shook their heads and sighed. Another day he overlooked a typing error in a letter that was sent out. The colleague whose letter it was did not speak to him directly but reported the incident to the team leader. The team leader confronted the junior team member, first gently, then more harshly, to the edge of brutality. In their open work space, this interaction was visible and audible to everyone. Scene like that began to occur more often. During them, the other team members exchange many glances of curiosity, slight relief, and disbelief about what was

happening. All stayed behind their desks. When the junior staff member walked out of the room with tears in his eyes, team members did not pay attention to him, seeming instead to concentrate on their own work. As if they had agreed on it, one day they did not ask him to join for their lunch walk: 'you are so busy' they said. The next day they went for their walk just as the junior team member left the room, and when he returned, he found them gone. During their walk, the colleagues were so busy talking about the junior team member that they forgot about the reorganization for a while. He started to notice that one-to-one contact with most of his colleagues could still be warm and understanding, but that his good feeling about the team as a group had disappeared.

When analyzing this situation in terms of drama triangle and bystanding, the following can be said: The team as a group in the organization shifted from a Rescuer position (delivering more work than contracted for) to a Victim position (their team leader being psychologically told to be quiet; they did not see options for another behavior). Senior management showed features of Persecuting; middle management may have been a Bystander.

Within the team, the junior team member was initially in a Rescuing role. When the workload became too heavy, he switched to the Victim role. The team leader took the role of Persecutor, repeatedly confronting the junior member from an 'I'm OK, you're not OK' position. The Bystanders - the other colleagues in the team - were the most numerous and said things like, 'people need to be told the truth every now and then, that is how it is in an organization'; 'this is nothing serious, we just had not noticed he was not there when we started our walk'; 'I have only worked here for a few months so I don't know yet'; 'if I open my mouth he'll get after me'. In the game of bullying, the Bystanders play an important role. Although they may not be aware of it, the reward from within the group itself, which Summerton described, is given – to each other and to the team leader - by the Bystanders.

Figure 4 is a visual presentation by De Graaf (2009) of the connection between organizational script and the script of individual employees.

Figure 5 shows individual and organizational script circles turn together, for example in this case, in the game of bullying. Both have their elements of belief-action-reinforcement.

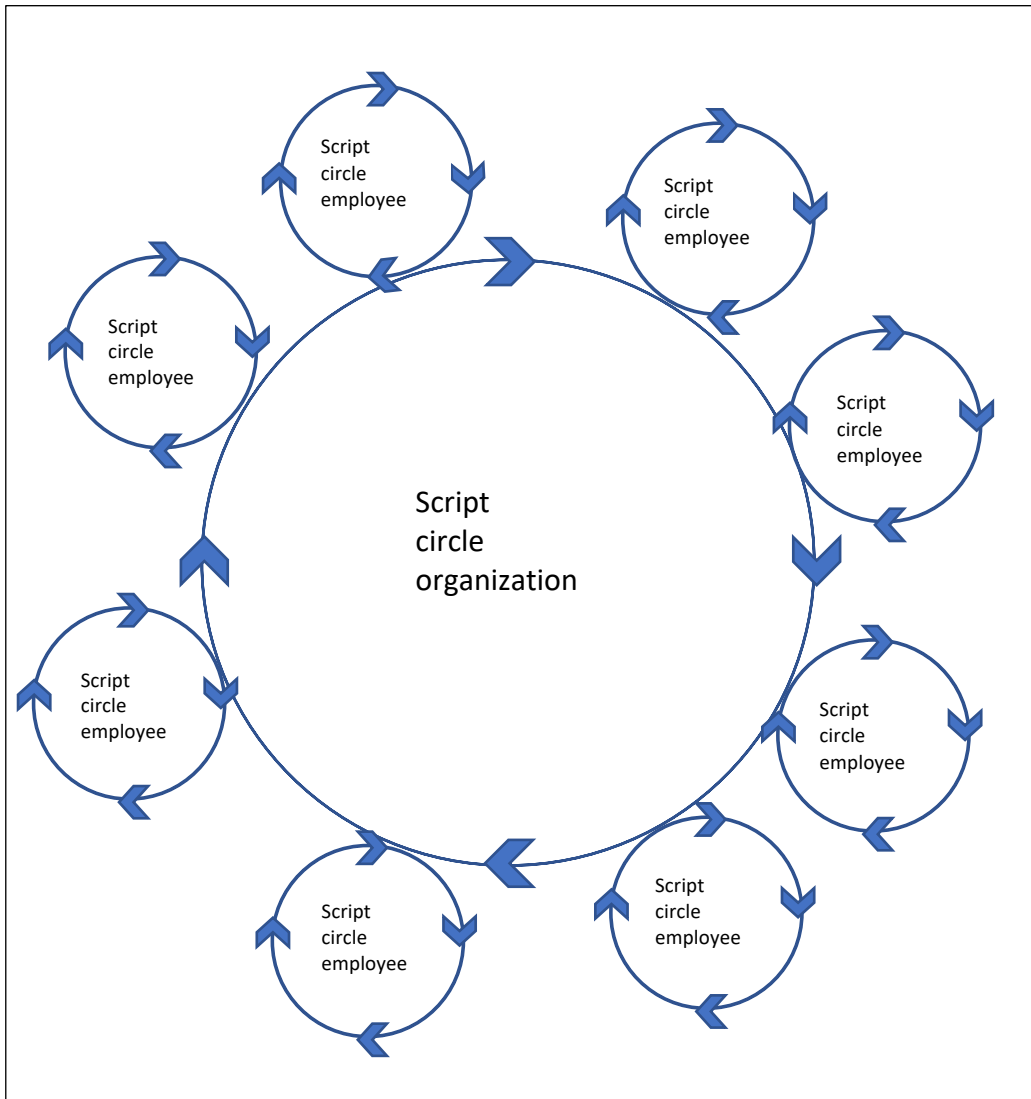
The bystander is key: KiVa program against bullying at schools

Children are not grown-ups, and a classroom is not an office. Yet the results of the Finnish KIVA anti-bullying method (KiVa International, n.d., 'Evidence of Effectiveness') are too promising and too thought provoking not to mention here.

KiVa views bullying as a group phenomenon. It says: 'The main aim of the program is to prevent bullying before it happens by influencing the group norms and building capacity in all the children to behave in constructive ways, to take responsibility for not encouraging bullying, and to support the vulnerable peers. In addition to being preventive, KiVa is also interventive with clear guidelines to tackle bullying when it does take place' (KiVa, n.d., 'Frequently asked questions', para. 1). Those guidelines amongst other things are about the role of Bystanders.

The KIVA method is an integrated program for all participants of a school, including parents. The program consists of training for teachers and children, protocols, parent meetings, posters about 'how we work at this school'. Researchers of the method found that all children in the class have a role in the bullying, not only the bully and the target.

Figure 4: Script Circle of Organization and Script Circles of Employees Cycle Together (de Graaf, 2009)



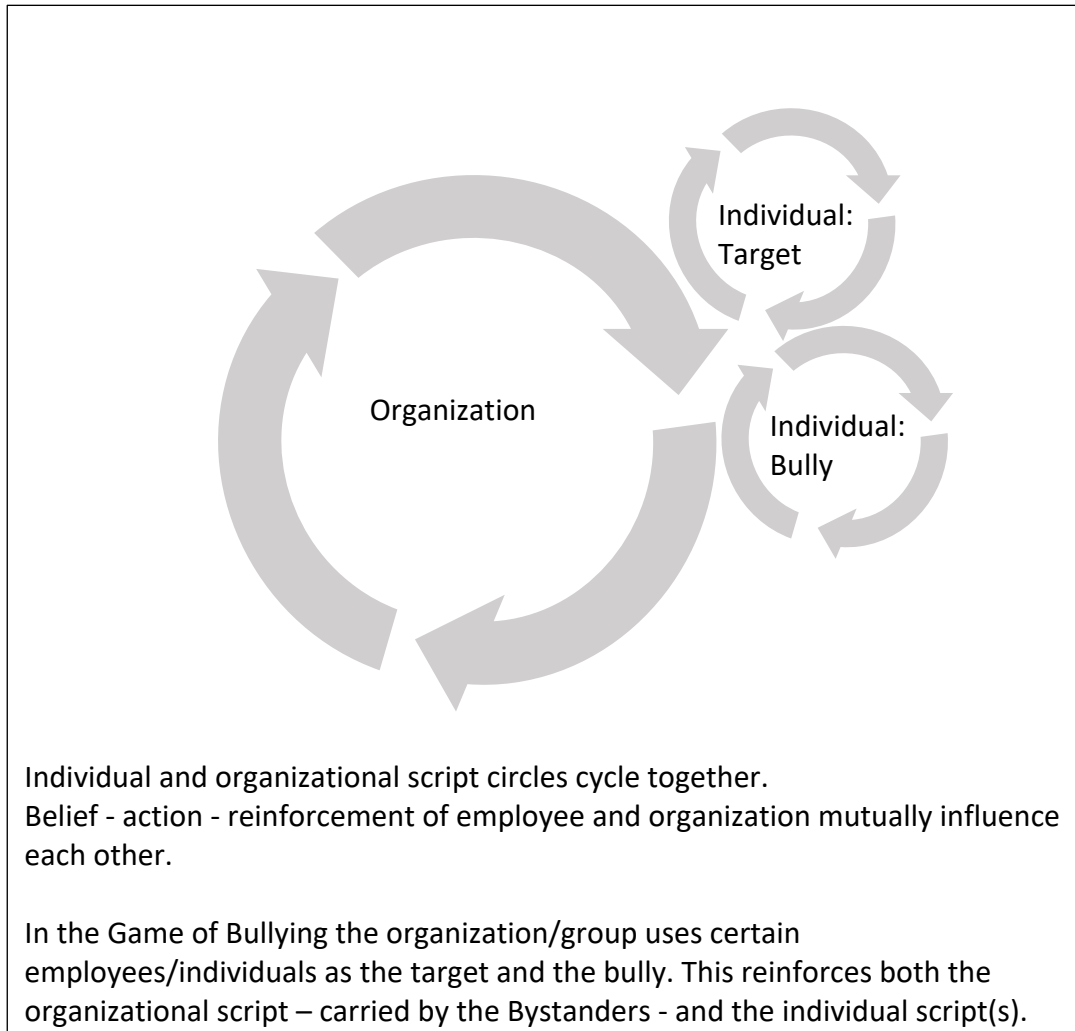
Victims may have certain characteristics that make them apt to be a target, bullies are often children with a high social status. Yet the culture in the class determines whether bullying occurs or not. The Bystanders are key: Their admiration or even silence supports the bully. Once the Bystanders stop their support, the social reward of bullying diminishes, and when it does not raise the bully's social status, it is not attractive anymore.

During a training to prevent bullying, I once proposed a roleplay to teachers from a secondary school. A participant roleplaying the Victim was touched by the difference one Bystander made when she, instead of laughing with the mass, simply took a chair and came to sit beside him.

Quoting the KiVA International website again: 'The program has been shown to reduce both self- and peer-reported bullying and victimization significantly. In addition, positive effects on school liking, academic motivation and achievement have been reported. KiVa also reduces anxiety and depression and has a positive impact on students' perception of their peer climate. A remarkable 98 % of victims (...) felt that their situation had improved. Finally,

Finnish data from more than 1000 schools (...) showed that after the first year of implementation, both victimization and bullying had reduced significantly' (KiVa International, n.d., 'Welcome to KiVa School', para.1).

Figure 5: Individual and Organizational Script Circles Cycle Together (adapted from Hay, 2016, slide 17)



'Turn shit into fertilizer'

Summerton (1992) wrote: 'The distinction between individual and social dynamics is useful for studying how social systems impact individual games and how organizational games are fueled by individual dynamics. To be effective, change strategies need to take both dimensions into consideration' (page 89). The effects of a toxic environment on individuals can be profoundly negative. The environment itself does not prosper when bullying occurs because energy is not focused on productivity. Mountain and Davidson (2011) described a case of bullying: 'Everyone in the hierarchy was involved in the process and no amount of courses or coaching would have helped her [the target]. This example highlights the fact that bullying is often a symptom of deeper organizational problems' (p. 209). In the theme issue of Transactional Analysis Journal on Games (Deaconu & Stuthridge, 2015), many authors regarded games as a symptom of something underlying, a means of communicating a theme, a problem, a subject that cannot be communicated (yet) in another way. Thinking about

bullying as an organizational game can open the way to explore what learning and development is needed in a specific organization. As a trainer of mine once rudely put it: 'find a way to turn shit into fertilizer'.

To return to the team discussed earlier, that was inspired by a situation, in which I had an interim-management role on the middle management level. I learned about the situation when the junior team member, near despair, told me he was being bullied. The HR department I consulted thought the junior person was the problem and not suited to his job. I also learned from HR that the team had a history of people being suddenly fired (by a boss HR viewed as brave) because the junior employee had shown a change in working attitude. In a team meeting on what I defined as a team problem, I first set the task of getting through this as a team. Then I encouraged the team to confirm and make more explicit the professional roles and responsibilities of each of the team members. Collectively, they seemed to believe that they would be safe to stay in the organization if only their junior would make no mistakes. I suggested being anxious about the future was hard and invited team members to acknowledge their fear and anger. This appeared a taboo area: 'Yes, of course we talk about it a lot, but don't make it too heavy; it is only work. We are all grownups and can deal with it, no worries!'. At the time, I had no notion yet of bullying as a group game, nor did I know about organizational script. Later I learned that the junior was fired shortly after my assignment ended.

Along with Summerton and KiVa, I believe it is important to take both social and individual dynamics into account to make effective change in cases of bullying. At the time of the situation described, I did not yet have the words to communicate about out-of-awareness or unconscious processes. I did not perceive the underlying issue(s) of the game and the connection with the organizational script. Today, with my knowledge and experience, I see I could have used the method of a relational consultant (Van Beekum, 2006) to work with unconscious processes. Using myself as an instrument would mean using the impact the organizational script had on me as information about the organization. Understanding that it would have become relevant that I noticed being a bit resistant each day I entered the building of this organization, as if my energy lowered. I remember I did not feel free to speak up and needed to collect all my courage to mirror the management team (middle and senior management) in a meeting about their – that is, our – way of working. Expressing a genuine personal but professional observation was rare. I sensed I could only do that if my analysis was perfect. The Bystander role of middle management seemed natural. With regard to the team, I now hypothesize that it was living a 'Be Perfect' driver and a 'Don't feel' injunction, thus obeying and reinforcing the organizational script. In hindsight, I can formulate questions as a way to start understanding underlying issues and open development towards professional intimacy and autonomy: What are the dos and don'ts in this team and in this organization? What is the stroking climate like? How does one belong here when one makes a mistake? What example of regulating emotions does the management give? How does the management deal with uncertainty? What is the contribution of this team to the organization's results? What is the psychological contract of the team in the organization? What is the psychological contract of team members among themselves? How is the drama triangle visible in the team: Persecutor, Rescuer, Victim, and who are the Bystanders? What in this team is not said but is relevant for the situation the team is in? What are you as a

member of this team willing to offer to the team? What do you need to contribute your full professionalism (from manager(s), from the team leader, from colleagues)?

Addressing questions such as these with the team as a whole, and with individual team members in the regular one-to-one talks, would have made it clear that some things that are out of awareness do have to be taken seriously. The conversation might open up the way to bring to the table what really counts as an alternative to pretending nothing serious is going on and acting bravely. The conversation could help to establish a culture in which professionals address what needs to be addressed. In short, professional intimacy means behaving from an autonomous place and therefore provides an alternative to games.

Closing remarks

By combining the individual and the organizational perspective into one frame of reference transactional analysis has a great deal to offer to people and organizations with bullying problems. For empowering the bullied individual, working with the personal script can be helpful (figure 1). In working with a team, the drama triangle extended with the Bystander role (figure 3) gives options for interventions on a group level. And for the TA professional who realizes that bullying is a group process, the connection between the individual and the organizational script (figures 4 and 5) offers important guidance. I believe combining the personal and the systemic perspective is beneficial for target, bully and organization.

Notes on contributor

Marian Timmermans MA is a PTSTA in the organizational field. She had a career as history teacher, policy advisor, interim-manager, management consultant, co-owner of a TA institute. She now is a self-employed executive coach and process facilitator. She provides TA (group) supervision to TA students and professionals. As TA trainer she is connected to the Dutch TA academie and to the Berne Institute (UK), where she teaches the MSc TA Org program. Marian can be reached at Maasheseweg 25, 5804 AA Venray, The Netherlands; email: mail@mariantimmermansconsult.nl

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