

2019 - 2020, Volume 7

## New Voices:

### Bullying and Harassment in the Workplace: Policy, Practice and Prevention in the Publicly Funded Arts in Northern Ireland

KATHERINE ELLIS

#### Summary:

This study looks at the context of, and possible reasons for, the current culture of bullying and harassment within the arts sector in the UK, taking two Northern Irish arts organisations as case-studies.

#### Abstract:

This study takes as its subject the issue of bullying and harassment in the UK arts sector. The research comprises a discussion of the organisational anti-bullying and harassment policies in place at two leading Belfast-based arts institutions, and an analysis of the findings from interviews carried out with staff at these institutions regarding attitudes to bullying and harassment in their specific work place and in the arts sector more generally. The analysis of these interviews identifies and discusses a number of factors that contribute to the specific nature of bullying and harassment found in the arts. These include: precarious employment practices, charismatic leadership styles and artistic temperaments, and male dominated environments, in addition to documenting and discussing attitudes towards these issues.

**Key words: Bullying; harassment; policy; arts**

Bullying and Harassment  
in the Workplace

KATHERINE ELLIS

## Introduction

Bullying and harassment in the workplace is a common occurrence, and something that research shows is on the rise (Wilton, 2016). This study built on and used Hutchinson's (2012) observation that bullying and harassment thrive in precarious environments, that are:

centred on individualisation and flexibility in terms of employment, jobs, organisational structures and workplace relations (2012, p.638).

These precarious working conditions are characteristic of the contemporary arts sector, due to ongoing funding pressures, and precarious employment practices (freelancing, part-time or fixed-term contracts being commonplace). Furthermore, in the arts there is a general acceptance of charismatic leadership styles and artistic temperaments, which further adds to this complex working environment. These factors, this research argues, produce particular challenges that result in the development of a widespread and accepted culture of bullying and harassment within arts organisations.

Although the topic of bullying and harassment in the sector has received relatively little academic attention, what few studies there are indicate deep-rooted, sector-wide issues. Anne-Marie Quigg's United Kingdom (UK)-based research describes widespread instances of bullying in the arts workplace, with "two in every five people working in theatres and arts centres reported being targeted by a bully" (2011, p.4; 2007). She states that, according to her data, the arts have the "highest level of bullying recorded in any single employment sector" (2011, p.xvi; 2007). These statistics are corroborated by research carried out by the Federation of Entertainment Unions (FEU), which surveyed over four-thousand people across their member organisations in the UK and Ireland. The survey found that 56% of those working in the sector had been bullied or harassed at work (FEU, 2013, p.3).

Bullying and Harassment  
in the Workplace

KATHERINE ELLIS

This research drew on current Human Resource (HR) Management discourse on bullying and harassment, more general critiques of cultural labour and cultural work (Alacovska, 2018; Banks, 2017; Hennekam & Bennett, 2017; Kleppe & Røyseng, 2016; Nisbett & Walmsley, 2016; DuBois, 2015; Gill & Pratt, 2008; Giga, Hoel & Cooper, 2003), and practice-based arts sector-specific research carried out by Quigg (2011) and the Trade Unions (FEU, 2013; Broadcasting, Entertainment, Communications and Theatre Union (BECTU), 2018a, Equity, 2018) into bullying and harassment in the UK. The three main academic critiques of cultural labour are: the precarious nature of working in the arts (long, unsociable-hours, low levels of pay, the precarity of employment and funding); the common belief that working in the arts is “different” to other sectors (DuBois, 2015; Quigg, 2011); and the widespread acceptance and prevalence of “charismatic” styles of leadership (Nisbett & Walmsley, 2016; Kleppe & Røyseng, 2016). These critiques were a useful basis on which to build a broader picture of the unique issue of bullying and harassment in the UK arts sector.

In 2017 and 2018 there was a wave of high-profile allegations of bullying and harassment in the arts sector across Ireland, the UK, and internationally. Notable cases of alleged bullying include that of the former Artistic Director of Dublin’s Gate Theatre, Michael Colgan, while the former Artistic Director of London’s Old Vic Theatre, Kevin Spacey, and former Hollywood film Producer, Harvey Weinstein stood criminally accused of sexual harassment. Such cases have not only raised awareness of the issues of bullying and harassment in the arts sector but have also highlighted the undeniable need for arts organisations to bring about change. Prior to these stories’ emergence, there had been little discussion within academic and practice-based research into the nature of bullying and harassment in the arts sector. Since then, there have been several reports published by Trade Unions that openly address this issue -- particularly from BECTU, Equity and the FEU – and which begin to offer advice and guidelines.

Bullying and Harassment  
in the Workplace

KATHERINE ELLIS

### **Objectives of this study and research methodology**

The present study seeks to contribute towards addressing the knowledge gap highlighted above. Its aims are twofold. Firstly, to identify the commonalities between current cultural labour behaviours, leadership styles and practices that are critiqued widely in academic research (Alacovska, 2018; Banks, 2017; Hennekam & Bennett, 2017) and general workplace practices that have been shown in broader HR management literature to cause and foster bullying behaviours and harassment (Wilton, 2016; Hutchinson, 2012).

Secondly, to discuss what policies and procedures are currently in place in arts organisations in Northern Ireland (NI) to protect staff against bullying and harassment, and the extent to which employees feel supported by them.

This study included case studies of two high-profile Belfast-based arts organisations. Both organisations' formal bullying and harassment policies were discussed. However, the bulk of the study was concerned with a thematic analysis of fourteen interviews that were carried out with organisations' staff members regarding their perceptions of bullying and harassment in the sector. This data was complemented by an interview with an arts industry professional who works closely with performing arts organisations and freelancers across NI.

### **Research Methodology**

Critical Realism was used as a research framework for this study, as it is useful for "analysing social problems and suggesting solutions for social change" and capable of providing "explanation and causal analysis", rather than simply relying on quantitative modes of analysis (Fletcher, 2017, p. 182).

This approach was appropriate for the current study as it allowed for a recognition of the complex nature of bullying and harassment. This study adopted a qualitative research methodology that allowed, in the first instance, for a discursive and open-ended analysis of the policies adopted by the organisations. In the second instance, a semi-structured approach to

Bullying and Harassment  
in the Workplace

KATHERINE ELLIS

interviews allowed for participants to give a less restricted account of this multifaceted issue.

This study took an “intensive approach” (Swanborn, 2010, p.2), focusing on two case studies, which was appropriate as it allowed for the broad sector-wide issues of bullying and harassment to be framed and discussed in the context of two NI arts organisations.

The case studies were the Metropolitan Arts Centre (MAC) and the Lyric Theatre, both arts organisations are situated in Belfast, NI. Together these organisations receive roughly 16% of the total of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland’s (ACNI) annual funding budget (ACNI, 2019). They were chosen for this research as they are both seen as flagship organisations in Belfast and have a certain standing within the arts community. Arguably, they hold a level of professional authority and responsibility for the sector and are considered to set a standard for the art that is created in NI.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen for this research to add an element of flexibility (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009), allowing participants to more fully develop points they wished to raise. This approach also allowed the researcher flexibility to amend and refine interview questions throughout the interview process, allowing for broader themes and avenues of enquiry to be explored in the interviews.

In order to maintain the anonymity of the participants across the two case studies, interview findings were collated, reviewed and presented together.

Bullying and Harassment  
in the Workplace

KATHERINE ELLIS

## Research Findings

### *What policies and procedures exist?*

All participants were aware that the organisation they work for had a formal bullying and harassment policy, although few indicated a full awareness of its content. An important detail is that although harassment is punishable under UK law, bullying is not. Bullying can, however, “be challenged under health and safety law as a workplace hazard detrimental to employees’ health” (FEU, 2013, p4). This small but fundamental difference places additional responsibility on organisations to protect their employees from bullying in the workplace, rather than individuals having recourse to the law.

Although participants were unable to fully explain the policy, they were generally aware that both the MAC and the Lyric take a zero-tolerance approach to bullying and harassment.

### *Do staff feel sufficiently supported?*

Generally, staff at both the MAC and the Lyric reported that they felt supported by the organisation for which they work. However, similar to Quigg’s (2011) findings, certain respondents said that they did not believe that the policies in place were effectively implemented enough to support staff. Participant M commented that:

[Policies] are not followed, so they don’t [support staff], you know. Even if, if they were maybe, but then, again, it’s the show takes [priority] over any policy. “The show must go on” mentality is still quite prevalent. (Participant M)

The perception that some arts organisations feel obliged to adopt policies that are then not effectively implemented was also mentioned by Participant N (who is an experienced and well regarded professional).

Tickling the box “we have a policy and procedure in place” is not enough. As I said, you have to be proactive. And I think that very often the case is in organisations -- particularly in the very stressed circumstances of Northern Irish arts organisations - - that those policies and procedures potentially have taken a back seat. (Participant N)

Bullying and Harassment  
in the Workplace

KATHERINE ELLIS

### *Possible reasons for a culture of bullying and harassment in the arts*

At the start of each interview fourteen participants were presented with the statistic that 56% of people working in the arts claimed to have been bullied at some point in their careers (FEU, 2013, p.3). When invited to respond to this, most participants indicated that they were unsurprised by the findings. Even those who claimed to be surprised were able to suggest reasons why it was so high. The most common themes cited by interviewees were: artistic/creative temperaments, precarious work and funding, and male-dominated environments. Notably, these reasons clearly reflect the academic critiques of cultural labour outlined above, which support the view taken in this study that further research is required to link these cultural labour practices and the existence of bullying and harassment.

### *Artistic Temperaments*

By far the most common reason given by participants for the existence of bullying and harassment in the arts sector was the prevalence and tolerance of an artistic or creative temperament. During interviews, participants frequently disclosed specific examples of recent occurrences of inappropriate behaviour by actors, creatives and directors. One participant stated:

We wouldn't accept it internally, but when there's people coming in and out, there seems to be more leniency...it's an "ack, sure, it's just him" (Participant I).

This participant suggested a disparity between the way that inappropriate behaviour is tolerated and accepted across the organisation. They indicated that particular types of behaviour are deemed acceptable among external freelancers/creatives that would not be tolerated were they exhibited by internal staff. This tolerance may be attributed to ambiguity in the organisations' bullying and harassment policies that do not clearly define how they apply to workers who are not contracted employees. Although charismatic leadership does not necessarily lead to bullying and harassment,

Bullying and Harassment  
in the Workplace

KATHERINE ELLIS

the culture of deference and tolerance of unorthodox behaviour can mean that inappropriate behaviour may be tolerated in -- or even expected of -- such a leader. This leadership style has significant crossover with the artistic temperament which, in general terms, refers to an expectation that creatives will tend to be wilful, demanding, egotistical, and prone to eccentric behaviour. There is a view, however, that these traits should be tolerated as they are somehow necessary to the “creative process”, presenting a dilemma regarding how to resolve the issue.

#### *Precarity – Funding and Freelancers*

Another reason for the prevalence of bullying and harassment in the arts suggested by many participants related specifically to the precarity of work in the sector. This includes both the commonplace nature of freelance, fixed-term work and the pressure placed on the sector due to the precarity of funding.

It was commonly acknowledged that complaints of bullying and harassment were not raised with management, particularly by freelancers for fear of gaining a reputation as being “difficult”, thereby damaging future employment opportunities. Participant D stated:

They [freelancers] rely a lot on the relationships that build up between them and theatres, or them and producers, or directors, or MDs. Therefore, that vulnerability just means that they sometimes feel they can't speak out...[as they] fear that the retribution afterwards would be much more severe...I would never be an actor. (Participant D)

This quote is of interest for multiple reasons. Firstly, the reliance on personal or professional contacts to gain work in the sector (Panic!, 2018). This leads to an unwillingness to speak out if they are subject to bullying or harassment for fear of “causing a fuss”. Participant N corroborated this statement:

[Freelancers] are particularly vulnerable, and I know they are particularly vulnerable because they are afraid, they won't get work in this town. Also, Ireland is a really small place, both North and South, and if you are deemed to be “difficult” then you won't get work, and



that is somebody's livelihood. So many of them have said that they "put up and shut up". (Participant N)

Bullying and Harassment  
in the Workplace

KATHERINE ELLIS

Freelancers are therefore particularly vulnerable to bullying and harassment, in part, due to the lack of support structures, but also the general culture of tolerance of inappropriate behaviour discussed earlier.

### *Funding*

Most participants were highly critical of the current arts funding climate in NI and all interviewees raised concerns about funding. ACNI allocates funding on an annual basis and arts organisations tend to be heavily reliant on public subsidy. This restricts organisations' ability to do real long-term strategic planning or advanced programming, producing further instability.

Furthermore, significant sector-wide funding cuts in NI have left organisations in further financial difficulty.

Participant E explained that there was constant pressure to make "the bottom line fit with your staff welfare" (Participant E). Other participants noted that a precarious funding climate was leading to increased competition between arts managers, who feel pressure to be seen as indispensable to their organisation. This environment could result in further anxiety and stress, leading to strained relationships and an exploitative working environment. This competition between staff could also make bullying behaviours more likely, as staff may feel compelled to undermine colleagues who they perceive as competition.

### *Male dominated environments*

The final commonly suggested reason for high instances of bullying and harassment in the arts is the gender imbalance in certain roles. Participants identified two areas that remain male-dominated: in senior management and backstage (in technical and stage management roles). This links closely with academic and practice-based critiques of cultural labour, particularly around

Bullying and Harassment  
in the Workplace

KATHERINE ELLIS

gender inequality in the sector (Panic!, 2018). Links can also be drawn here between discussions around charismatic leadership and artistic temperament, and to the media coverage of bullying and sexual harassment cases involving Colgan, Spacey and Weinstein, all of whom were industry figures in very high positions of power in arts organisations. As participant N notes, in these cases, it took a long time for staff to feel able to speak out:

People were aware of what was going on and they stayed quiet. [...] In so many cases they weren't in the position to say anything because they were afraid for their own employment and [their silence] just creates that culture of ongoing abuse. And then somebody stands up and suddenly we have a very long history where lots of people then feel that they can come forward. (Participant N)

This study suggests that the precarious work environment, in addition to the prevalence of charismatic male leadership, could explain why more allegations of bullying and harassment in the arts have not yet been brought forward and again is an area where further research is required.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

All participants suggested that more could be done to better support staff. The key suggestions made by interviewees to prevent occurrences of bullying and harassment in the arts were: better training provision, a culture change, and a more cohesive approach to the issue across the sector.

However, what also became apparent throughout the interviews was that certain participants tried to justify the very environments that they suggested were the reasons for bullying and harassment. Many participants claimed that the reason they accept the long hours, low wages and the precarious nature of the sector is for the "love" of the job and because the arts is their 'passion'. Participants from both organisations made it clear that they believed that the inherent value and prestige of working in the arts sector takes precedence

Bullying and Harassment  
in the Workplace

KATHERINE ELLIS

over their perhaps unfavourable working conditions. This relates back to the notion posited in some academic literature that the arts is a vocation, rather than a career (DuBois, 2015; Quigg, 2011).

It should be seen as a positive that many choosing to work in the sector are doing so because they believe in the importance and value of the arts, particularly at a time when public funding is becoming increasingly stretched. However, this unquestioning faith in the sector can cause employees to be short-sighted, leading to an unconditional acceptance of poor working conditions. This study argues that these conditions in the arts sector are inherently linked to the negative workplace environments that facilitate bullying and harassment.

The findings suggested that contributing factors to the high levels of bullying and harassment in the sector include precarity, artistic & charismatic temperaments, and the prevalence of male dominated workplaces. This largely correlated with the general critiques of cultural labour and the findings of several studies and reports commissioned by various industry bodies and Trade Unions.

This study suggested some ways in which the sector could enact a change in culture. The findings also suggested several impediments to this change: the belief in the necessity of a charismatic leadership styles in the sector; the existence and acceptance of an artistic temperament; and the overwhelming acceptance of poor workplace conditions. These attitudes, along with the mentality that these behaviours are part of what it means to work in the arts, all contribute to an engrained tolerance of them. Until these behaviours and environments are acknowledged by the sector as being unacceptable then conditions will continue to go unchallenged. Both the literature and interview findings made it clear that more research needs to be done regarding ways to address concerns in the sector.

Bullying and Harassment  
in the Workplace

KATHERINE ELLIS

Not only should more research be done specifically on bullying and harassment in the arts sector, looking at the effects and preventative measures that can be implemented by arts organisations, but academics should be looking to acknowledge the obvious connections between the critiques of cultural labour, the negative environments these critiques create, and the prevalence of inappropriate workplace behaviours, such as bullying and harassment.

Katherine Ellis recently graduated with distinction from Queen's University, Belfast with an MA in Arts Management. She has ten years' experience of working in the arts sector, including at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, The Hepworth Wakefield, and the Ulster Orchestra. She currently works as a Relationship Manager at Arts Council England.

### **Bibliography**

Alacovska, Ana (2018). Informal creative labour practices: A relational work perspective. *Human Relations*. 71(12). pp.1563–1589. doi: [10.1177/0018726718754991](https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726718754991).

Banks, Mark (2017). *Creative Justice: Cultural Industries, Work and Inequality*. London: Rowan & Littlefield International.

Bartlett, James & Bartlett, Michelle (2011). *Workplace Bullying: An Integrative*

Bullying and Harassment  
in the Workplace

KATHERINE ELLIS

Literature Review. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*. 13(1). pp.69–84. doi:[10.1177/1523422311410651](https://doi.org/10.1177/1523422311410651).

Broadcasting, Entertainment, Communications and Theatre Union (BECTU) (2018a). *Standing up for yourself and each other*. [Online] [Accessed on 10 January 2019]. Available from: <https://www.bectu.org.uk/advice-resources/library/2531>

DuBois, Vincent. (2015). *Culture as a Vocation: Sociology of Career Choices in Cultural Management*. Routledge.

Equity (2018). *Agenda for Change Report*. [Online] [Accessed 10 January 2019]. Available from: <https://www.equity.org.uk/media/1263/agenda-for-change.pdf>

Federation of Entertainment Unions (FEU) (2013). *Creating without Conflict Survey Report*. [Online] [Accessed 10 January 2019]. Available from: <https://www.musiciansunion.org.uk/Files/Reports/Campaigns/FEU-Creating-without-Conflict-Survey-Report>

Fletcher, Amber (2017). Applying critical realism in qualitative research: methodology meets method. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*. 20(2). pp.181–194. doi: [10.1080/13645579.2016.1144401](https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2016.1144401).

Giga, Sabir, Hoel, Helge, and Cooper, Cary (2003). *Violence and stress at work in the performing arts and in journalism*. [Online]. International Labour Office, Geneva. [Accessed 06 July 2018]. Available from: [http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_dialogue/---sector/documents/publication/wcms\\_242865.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_dialogue/---sector/documents/publication/wcms_242865.pdf)

Bullying and Harassment  
in the Workplace

KATHERINE ELLIS

Gill, Rosalind and Pratt, Andy (2008). Precarity and Cultural Work: In the Social Factory? Immaterial Labour, Precariousness and Cultural Work. *Theory, Culture & Society*. 25(7/8). pp.1–30. doi: [10.1177/0263276408097794](https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276408097794).

Hennekam, Sophie and Bennett, Dawn (2017). Sexual Harassment in the Creative Industries: Tolerance, Culture and the Need for Change, *Gender, Work and Organization*. 24(4). pp.417-434. doi:[10.1111/gwao.12176](https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12176).

Hutchinson, Jacquie (2012). Rethinking Workplace Bullying as an Employment Relations Problem. *Journal of Industrial Relations*. 54(5). pp. 637–652. doi: [10.1177/0022185612454955](https://doi.org/10.1177/0022185612454955).

Kleppe, Bård and Røyseng, Sigrid (2016). Sexual Harassment in the Norwegian Theatre World. *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society*. 46(5). pp.282-296. doi: [10.1080/10632921.2016.1231645](https://doi.org/10.1080/10632921.2016.1231645).

Nisbett, Melissa and Walmsley, Ben (2016). The Romanticization of Charismatic Leadership in the Arts. *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society*. 46(1). pp.2-12. doi: [10.1080/10632921.2015.1131218](https://doi.org/10.1080/10632921.2015.1131218)

Oakley, Kate & O'Brien, David (2016). Learning to labour unequally: understanding the relationship between cultural production, cultural consumption and inequality. *Social Identities*. 22:5. pp.471-486. doi: [10.1080/13504630.2015.1128800](https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2015.1128800)

Panic! (2018). *The Panic! Survey*. [Online] [Accessed 21 March 2019]. Available from: <http://www.createlondon.org/panic/survey/>

Quigg, Anne-Marie (2016[2011]). *Bullying in the Arts: Vocation, Exploitation and Abuse of Power*. Routledge

Srivastava, Prachi & Hopwood, Nick (2009). A Practical Iterative Framework for Qualitative Data Analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*. pp.76–84. doi: [10.1177/160940690900800107](https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690900800107).

Swanborn, Peter (2010). *Case study research: what, why and how?*. Sage.

Wilton, Nick (2016). *An introduction to human resource management*. Third edn. Los Angeles; 4: Sage.