



Nicole Williams  
Organisational Psychology



# Diving Deeper:

## Unveiling the Undercurrents of NHS Team Dynamics

**Nicole Williams CPsychol, Chartered Occupational & Coaching Psychologist**

**NHS Employers Do OD Conference, 14<sup>th</sup> May 2024**

# About Me



- 11+ years NHS experience, four years Deputy Director of OD
- NWOP (Nicole Williams Organisational Psychology) established in 2021.
- Previous Work
  - Focus on staff engagement and cultural improvement strategies, especially within NHS Trusts.
- Current Focus
  - Supporting organisations, teams, and leaders in continuous cultural improvement, with a special interest in working with negative cultures.
- Registered Occupational Psychologist with the HCPC (Health and Care Professions Council)
- Chartered Coaching Psychologist with the BPS (British Psychological Society).



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Chartered Psychologist [www.hcpc-uk.org](http://www.hcpc-uk.org)

# “Toxic” teams & culture



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### Bullying and toxic culture at one of England's largest NHS trusts - report

© 28 March 2023

**FAMILY**  
Junior doctor Vaish Kumar died in June 2022

By Sophie Madden  
BBC News, West Midlands

Repeated cases of bullying and a toxic environment at one of England's largest NHS trusts have been found in a review.

## Toxic doctors put patients at risk, says NHS watchdog

From sepsis to maternity, the ombudsman says he is shocked by failings every day



Rob Behrens told The Times Health Commission that reputation was too often put before safety

Patient safety is being put at risk by the “toxic” behaviour of doctors in the NHS, the health ombudsman has said.

Rob Behrens, who investigates complaints about the NHS in England, warned that the hierarchical and high-handed attitude of clinicians was undermining the quality of care in some hospitals.

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### 'Toxic NHS bullying traumatised me so much I moved abroad - I couldn't eat or sleep'

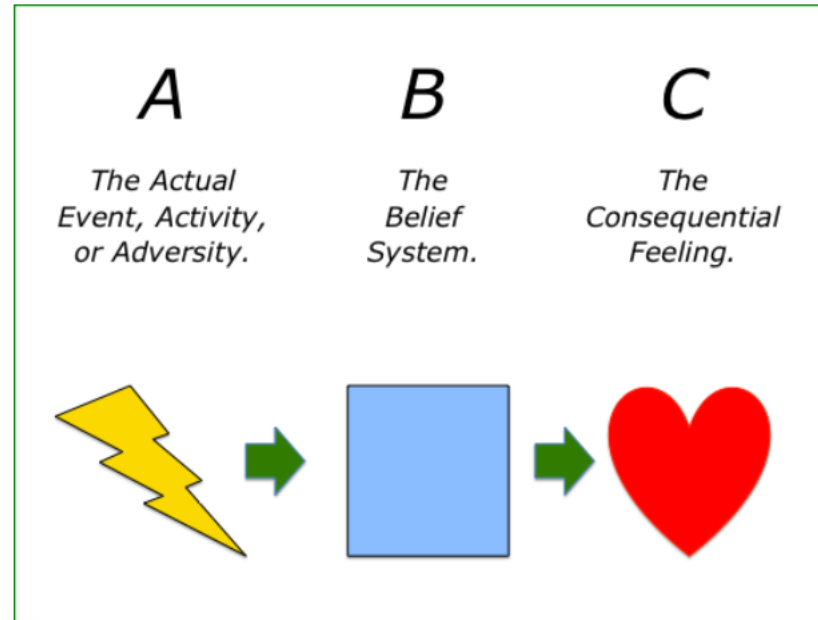
"There were people who were extremely supportive towards me, but there were also people who were the complete opposite. I was counting down the days until I could finish"

By Paige Oldfield Real life writer

16:08, 5 MAY 2024

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# Fear and Survival



- Notice: Signs of severe risk aversion and lack of psychological safety.
- Fear & Survival = A climate of self-interest

# Aggression

- What do we think of when teams are in “conflict”?
- Fear as a result of a “hostile” work environment leads to behaviours that help to defend oneself e.g. aggression, (Fida et al, 2018)
- Overt aggression vs relational aggression (Crothers et al, 2009).



# Moral Disengagement

- Why would someone want to engage in negative behaviours?
- Climate of self-interest strongly associated with moral-disengagement (Fida et al, 2023).
- Moral disengagement = Temporarily silencing our moral system while outwardly professing the same values, in order to behave in a morally questionable, yet self-serving way (Bandura, 1991).





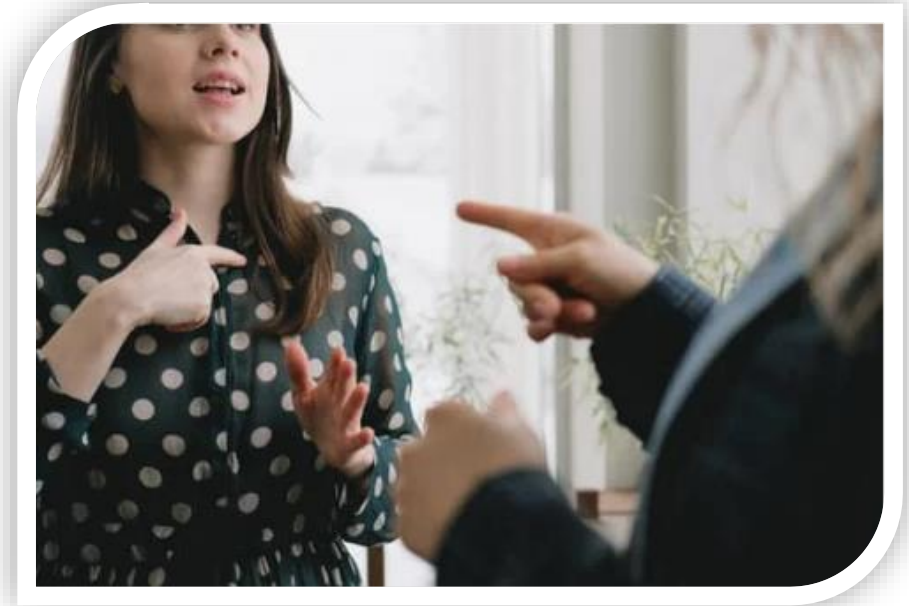
# Ambiguity

- Ambiguous behavioural expectations/standards
- Different perspectives about what is deemed acceptable or unacceptable behaviour = ambiguity and confusion
- Certain behaviours become normalised over time and shapes the team culture.
- Relevant to relational aggression behaviours



# Disagreements

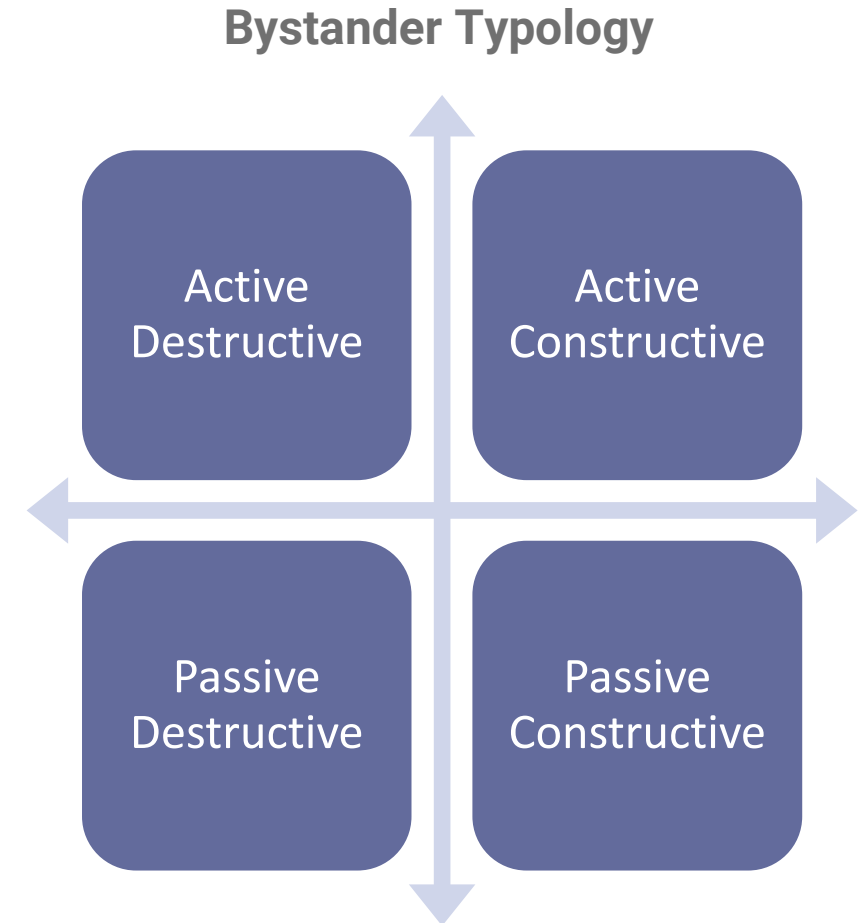
- Notice: Are disagreements dealt with constructively or taken personally?





# Bystanders

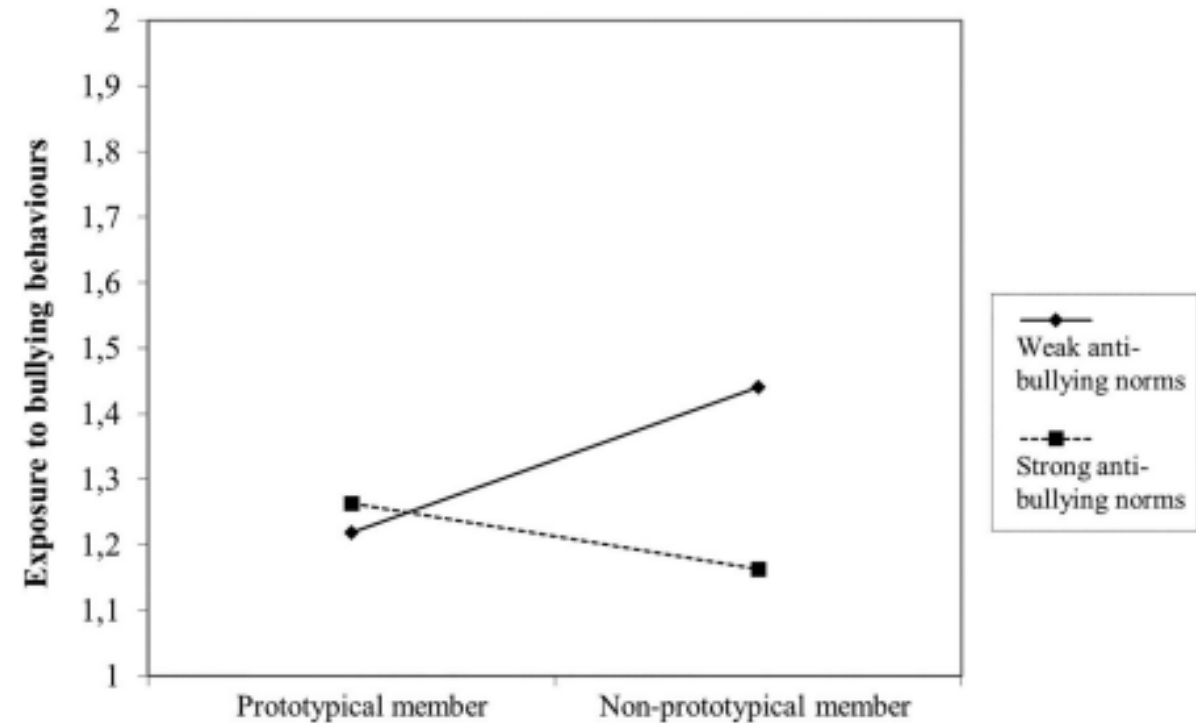
- “Good” bystanders mitigate the impact of negative behaviour
- “Bad” bystanders can worsen the negative behaviours and the impact on the target
- Constructive and Destructive bystanders
- Active and passive bystanders (Paull et al, 2008)
- It doesn't always serve staff to address and challenge negative behaviours.



- Smaller, tightly-knit subgroup emerging from ingroup-outgroups.
- Benefits and disadvantages of clique membership
- Difficulty challenging behaviours when cliques exist:
  - It doesn't serve people to stand up to negative behaviours of the clique.
  - Negative perceptions of the target develop, negative behaviours are excused
  - Negative behaviours normalised e.g. banter, gossiping.
  - Difficulty for leaders to see the reality of these negative behaviours.

# Cliques & Marginalisation

- Individuals different from the ingroup faces a higher risk of being targeted in an environment that condones uncivil behaviours.
- In contrast, when such behaviours aren't tolerated, the risk is no different from ingroup members.
- Glambek, Einarsen & Notelaers, 2020



# The Workplace

- Site visits are important. Look out for:
  - The spaces where staff interact
  - Does the environment encourage team interaction or isolation?
  - Opportunities for spontaneous encounters
  - Spaces for sensitive conversations?
  - Communal/social spaces - where do people congregate?
  - Competition for space.



# Power & Leadership

- Power dynamics: Hierarchical and social power
- Some leaders may struggle to navigate team dynamics
- Proactive vs laissez-faire leadership (Agotnes, 2022)

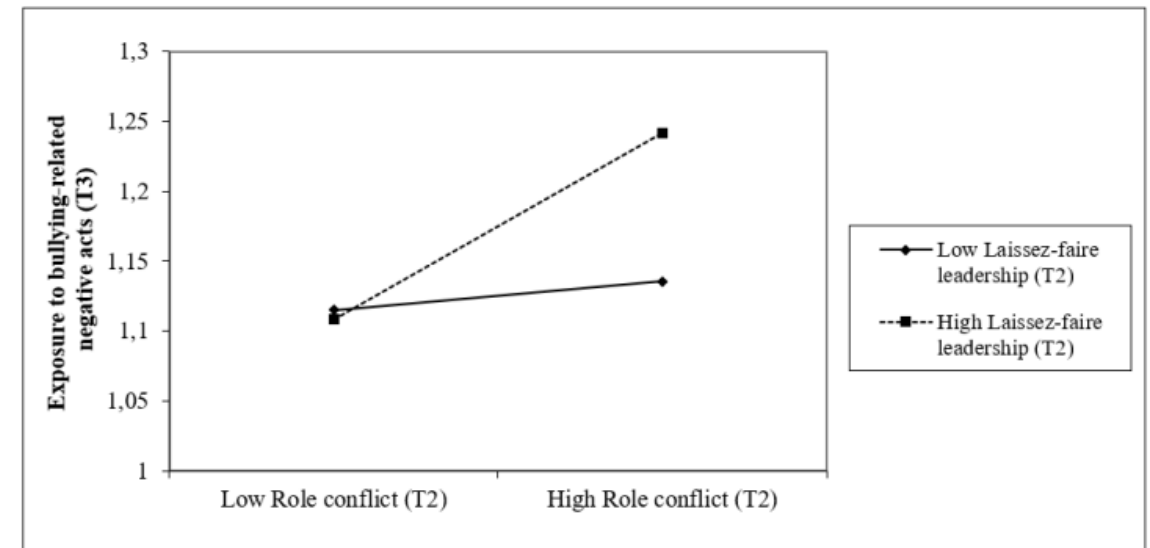
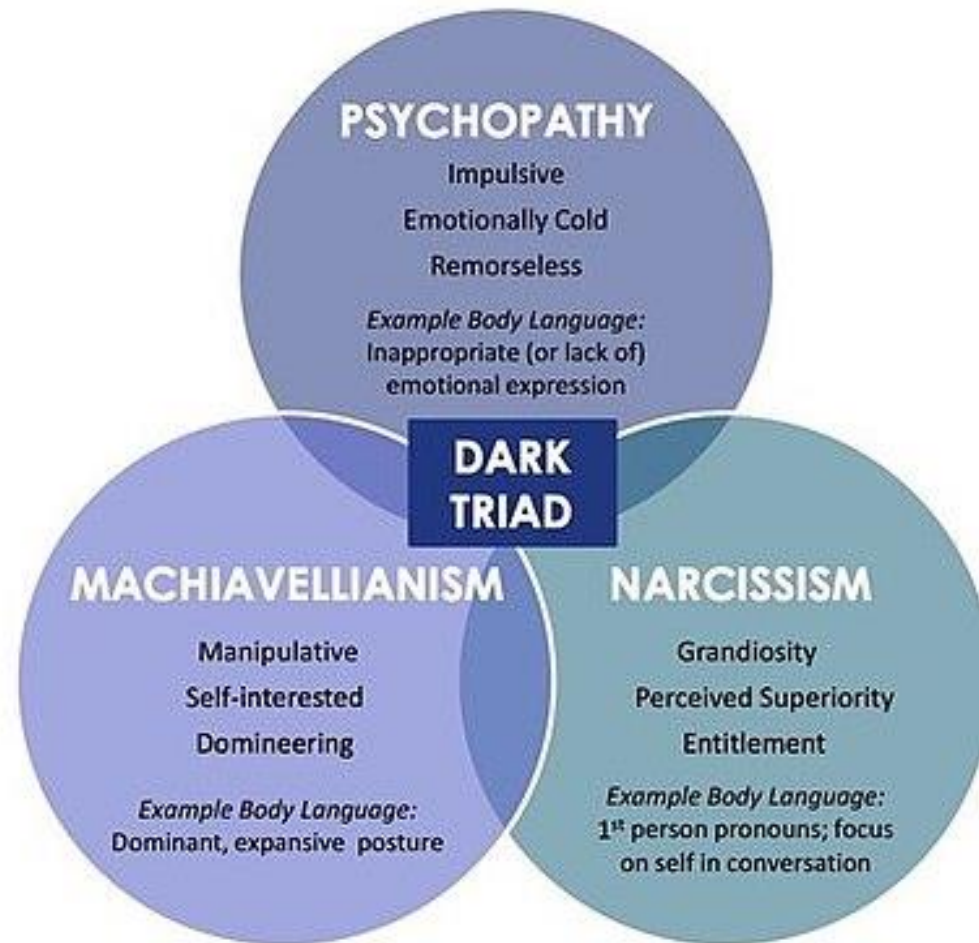


Figure 1. The relationship between role conflicts (T2) and exposure to bullying behaviours (T3), moderated by laissez-faire leadership (T2).

# Personality





# Interventions



- Behavioural Standards for interpersonal interactions/team dynamics (Pearson, Andersson & Porath, 2000)
- Bring negative behaviours to consciousness
- Conflict resolution process:
  - Formal and informal systems/processes (Tenbrunsel et al, 2003)
    - Sanctions
    - Surveillance,
    - Training
    - Communication
- Support for leaders to navigate team dynamics
  - Cognitive Behavioural Coaching

## Do you have a climate for conflict management?

### Key Questions to ask:

- If I have a serious disagreement with someone at work, I know who I should talk to about it?
- The way we deal with disagreements between staff in my team works well
- My leaders deal with conflicts in a good manner
- We have proper procedures and methods for raising disagreements and handling conflicts.

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# Thank you & Questions



## Get in touch:

E: [Nicole.Williams@nw-op.co.uk](mailto:Nicole.Williams@nw-op.co.uk)

P: 07984113937

W: [www.nw-op.co.uk](http://www.nw-op.co.uk)

