Fevre, Ralph, Duncan Lewis, Amanda Robinson, and Trevor Jones. "The Troubled Workplace." *Trouble at Work*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012. 201–230. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781849664677.ch-009>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 15:23 UTC.

Copyright © Ralph Fevre, Duncan Lewis, Amanda Robinson & Trevor Jones 2012. You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

The Troubled Workplace

Although the literature we discussed in Chapter 1 was largely concerned with workplace bullying, rather than the broader category of trouble at work, many of the topics covered in that literature have reappeared in our analyses, although we have not always presented them in the same terms as the bullying researchers. For example, most of the ill-treatment we found was of employees by their managers, but we found it more helpful to interpret this finding in terms of conflicts over authority and control rather than power distance. Moreover, we found that it was generally not the weakest and most vulnerable workers who reported the most ill-treatment. Other subjects discussed in Chapter 1 which received extensive coverage in our analyses included autonomy, communication in organisations, conflict escalation, employee participation and representation, high-commitment HR management, job insecurity, industries and sectors, leadership, management styles, minorities, occupations, organisational change (including chaotic workplaces), role conflict and role ambiguity, routine organisational processes and activities, workload and work intensification, workplace culture and workplace diversity. In this chapter, we shall summarise our findings on all of these themes, however, even though there is some overlap between bullying and trouble at work (see pp. 25–6); we do not think it would be legitimate to suggest that our findings confirm or challenge those of the bullying literature. In fact, we shall only refer back to those parts of the literature that we think have paved the way for a more sociological approach.

We have not looked to psychological factors to explain why any of these subjects are relevant to, indeed can help us to explain, trouble at work. Instead, we have looked to the characteristics of the workplace itself. Our research has revealed the two workplace characteristics which are most strongly associated with trouble at work: conflict with employers over workplace norms and the ill-treatment of those who provide public services by members of the public. Where one or both of these vectors for trouble at work is present, there will be an increased chance of a troubled workplace which has a concentration of ill-treatment. Employees who work in a troubled workplace are more at risk of ill-treatment than other employees, and the members of the troubled minority are largely drawn from their ranks.

In the following section, we illustrate how different the sociological approach is from the individualised medical and psychological approaches

by exploring the different views taken in each approach about the harm caused by trouble at work. It is most commonly assumed in the literatures on bullying and stress that ill-treatment is a problem for everyone concerned, including the employer, and not just those who suffer directly from bullying and stress. The sociological approach makes no such assumption and we discuss the extent to which our research has suggested that some employers may not only encourage trouble at work but, as suggested by Beale and Hoel (2011), actually benefit from it. Before we do this, however, we must summarise what we know about the impact on employees of trouble at work.

Whose trouble is it?

By saying trouble at work has more sociological coherence than either workplace bullying or work-related stress, we are not denying that ill-treatment has very serious effects on people's health, finances, relations with family and friends, relations with their employer and their feelings about their work. All of these effects were documented in the first half of this book, but it is also worth remembering that the aspects of trouble at work which we had initially thought would be most serious were not always those which employees identified as having the most impact on them. Unreasonable treatment had greater impact than denigration or disrespect and the violence from clients and others, which employees seemed to be so reluctant to consider as criminal behaviour.

Although managers were responsible for quite a bit of incivility and disrespect, they were responsible for most unreasonable treatment. It was this kind of ill-treatment that signified something had gone wrong in an employee's relations with his or her employer, and which affected his or her feelings about work, and we argue that this was why employees felt it had the greatest impact on them. In order to fully understand this finding, we need to bear in mind just how important work seemed to be – not as a means to an end (such as status or income) but as an end in itself – to the vast majority of the people we interviewed in our case studies. The meaning and significance people found in their work lives, and the emotional satisfaction it gave them, were obvious, though perhaps not unexpected, at Strand and Westshire and even Banco. It is therefore worth recalling that most Britscope employees also felt like this. Indeed, we described their expression of positive commitment to their work as a striking feature of the Britscope interviews. Two-thirds of the interviewees reported in different ways that they enjoyed their jobs. Some went so far as to say that they loved the work and felt 'proud' to work for the organisation. When we remember that this level of commitment was central to many of our interviews, we can see how people might be particularly affected

by treatment which seemed to demonstrate that their work was not valued, and their employer felt no reciprocal commitment.

In fact, the key to changing how people felt about work was – as Pearson *et al.* (2001) might have predicted – the presence of a *moral* element in the employer's evaluation. Many of our interviewees told us they had been model employees – always being prepared to go the extra mile, like the Strand workers who were prepared to do something 'a bit special' or the Britscope employees who never wanted to take time off when they were ill – but found themselves no longer well regarded for reasons they could not fathom. To such employees, trouble at work felt like an existential crisis: what they used to believe was best for the organisation, and their clients or customers, and what they used to be praised for doing was no longer good enough. It was through the experience of ill-treatment – both unreasonable treatment and incivility and disrespect – that an employee learnt that his or her employer had found himself or herself at fault.

The very fact that an employer seeks to change the way an employee works is sufficient proof that the employer is no longer satisfied with the employee's work; yet this need not amount to blaming them, and thereby devaluing the work they have done, and personal sacrifices they have made in the past. It is perfectly possible for past contributions to be fully recognised even when employer and employees agree that newer, and better, ways of working are now possible. It is, however, unlikely that this will happen where employees are being ill-treated. Employees told us that ill-treatment signalled to them they were mistaken to believe their work had been valued in the past and, in their conversations with us, they revealed some of the deep-seated conflicts which underlie trouble at work. Where they had been convinced they had been model employees, the ill-treatment meted out by their employer was now signalling something completely different.

In these cases, ill-treatment was a marker for a fundamental disagreement between employer and employee about the nature of valued work (as described by Roscigno, Hodson and Lopez 2009). No matter how steadfastly the employee held to the view that they have been a good and valuable employee, they now knew that their employer thought they were deluded. It was this slur on their integrity – or dignity (Bolton 2007; Hodson 2001; Hoel and Beale 2006; Peyton 2003; Rayman 2001) – that had such a great impact on so many of the employees in our study. It is perhaps not too dramatic to say that the experience demoralised them, not simply in the conventional sense of lowering their morale but also in the sense that it showed that others were prepared to question whether they were behaving in a moral way. This is something that a clinical idea of stress (Walker and Fincham 2011), or a psychological concept of bullying, struggles to encompass but it is all of a piece with the classic sociological concern – present in the writings of both Adam Ferguson and Émile Durkheim, for example – with moral relations between people (Fevre 2001; Pearson *et al.* 2001).

The literatures on bullying and stress would not, of course, deny the effect of ill-treatment on morale. Indeed, the effects of lowered morale on productivity, attendance and labour turnover (resulting in the associated costs of hiring and training) routinely make up the prime elements in any calculation of the cost of bullying to employers (Beale and Hoel 2011: 14). As we hinted at the end of the previous section, these literatures thereby assume that ill-treatment is as much a problem for the employer as it is for the employee. If it is assumed that ill-treatment results from the behaviour of bullies in the workplace – who are as, or more, likely to be co-workers than managers – this might seem a logical conclusion to reach. Yet when our study shows the dominant role managers play in creating trouble at work, this is bound to raise the question of why managers persist in condoning, if not causing, trouble at work if it loses them money. This also reveals one of the major defects of the usual calculation of the costs of bullying to employers: not only are such calculations usually based on guesswork about costs and, especially, any productivity effects, but they almost never balance these costs with any *gains* that might accrue from ill-treatment.

In our analysis, we have not assumed that trouble for one side of the key moral relation between employees and employers necessarily spells trouble for the other. Indeed, our research has demonstrated what Beale and Hoel (2011) proposed: that employers might be quite prepared to put up with a bit of trouble to achieve their aims. Perhaps the best way to grasp this point is to discuss those situations where employers were trying to change the terms of their relationship with their employees. We are not denying that, if employees associate organisational change with trouble at work, this can sometimes cause difficulties for employers. We shall consider the possibility that some employers are put in this position by managers who either do not understand what is in the best interests of their employer or are incapable of acting on this knowledge. For now, however, we need to raise the possibility that trouble at work is a price employers are willing to pay when they view change as essential to the progress of the business. If change cannot be achieved by methods which avoid upsetting the workforce, then so be it. We also have to consider the possibility that, for some employers, it could be that upsetting the workforce is actually the object, inherent to the change they want to bring about.

From what we learnt in our research, for example, at Britscope and Banco, it is not at all far-fetched to suggest that employers may sometimes want to shake up the way that employees feel about their work and their relations with their employer, to shift them out of their comfort zone and dispel their complacency. In such instances, the usefulness to employers of the notion of an identity of interests between capital and labour is at an end and, if not wishing to demoralise their workers, employers may certainly want to make them uncertain of their position, and worth, and anxious to please. So, either

because it is a necessary means to an end or because it is an end in itself, employers may consciously set out to create trouble at work. In this case, the association between change and ill-treatment is a result of the employers' actions. They are prepared to risk the demoralisation (in both senses) of their own workforce because of the fundamental disagreement they have with their employees over the nature of valued work.

In order to fully understand the normative conflicts that occur in such cases, we ought to recall that the BWBS showed that, for the most part, trouble at work was not about bad employers victimising the marginal and vulnerable. In fact, it was the more privileged employees who were more likely to complain about their employers, and particularly their managers. It is no surprise to us that, when the pretence that employers and employees have identical interests is dropped, the strongest employees are most likely to stand up for themselves. Of course, from the employers' side of the normative conflict these complaints might be heard as cries of pain from the comparatively well-off who felt they were being asked to work a bit too hard or take less time off. Or perhaps they were being given more oversight and less freedom to do what they liked.

In such normative conflicts, British employers (and a succession of sympathetic governments) can argue that trouble at work is the necessary price that must be paid to modernise unproductive work practices. Thus it was argued that Britscope's effort to bargain with its employees had been struck when the organisation was in a very different market situation and faced little if any (and often non-unionised) competition. Similarly, Banco was trying to do something about unprofitable parts of its organisation apparently operating on the wrong business model with outdated practices. Indeed, Westshire had benefited from considerable investment but was struggling to show the benefit of all this spending because, the employers argued (under political pressure), of unproductive work practices. It should not be forgotten, however, that these *are* the employers' accounts and that they were contested.

The BWBS provided evidence that organisational change is associated with ill-treatment, but it is also important to remember the type of change that was involved. The evidence was strongest in respect of employees' reports of loss of control. This factor was more strongly associated with all three types of trouble at work than almost any other factor in our analyses. It is of considerable importance to the interpretation of this finding that simply working in a job with low autonomy was not associated with any kind of trouble at work. We take this as evidence that, when they added ill-treatment to reduced autonomy, employers were trying to take relatively privileged employees down a peg or two, wrest the initiative from them, enforce the manager's right to manage and move the business on in the way they wanted to. From their viewpoint, this made obvious sense but it did, however, risk demoralising the employees who were on the receiving end.

Employees who work in a job with little autonomy will have no *prima facie* reason to believe they have failed to fulfil others' expectations of them, but an employee who has *lost* autonomy and, at the same time, been subject to ill-treatment is much more likely to reach this conclusion. While their managers may feel that they are simply reasserting their right to manage in order to redress a problem, from the employees' point of view it seems that their input, apparently so valued in the past, is no longer needed and, indeed, might be part of the problem managers are addressing. This was a feeling that the financial advisers of Banco appeared to share with those who complained of the 'target culture' replacing professional judgement at Westshire. In both cases, where once employee autonomy had been indispensable to the success of the organisation, it was now an obstacle. The turning of a potential difference of opinion into actual conflict was marked by the occurrence of ill-treatment. This ill-treatment might reside in the tactics employers used to force through the changes they wanted to make, or employees might simply see the accomplishment of these changes as constituting ill-treatment. At Banco, for example, the field force of financial advisors complained both that their loss of autonomy amounted to unreasonable treatment *and* that their managers were treating them with incivility and disrespect as a tactic to achieve the changes they wanted.

If the combination of reduced autonomy and ill-treatment was clear evidence of deep-seated conflict over the nature of workplace norms, the same applied to those cases where employees experienced a combination of ill-treatment and super-intense work. Where trouble at work was associated with working too intensely, there was a conflict over what level of work was appropriate or possible. Like less control, super-intense work was strongly associated with all three types of trouble at work, whereas the alternative measure of *increased* pace of work only predicted one type, unreasonable treatment. There is, therefore, a possibility that less conflict was entailed when work intensification occurred than in cases where employees simply felt the work they already had was too intense. It may be that, in a similar way to the Banco example in the previous paragraph, employees saw an increase in the pace of work as constituting unreasonable treatment in itself. It could also be that there was more scope for employees to agree increasing the pace was reasonable – because, presumably, they had spare capacity – than there was for them to agree that they should be working too intensely.

People's judgements about whether they have spare capacity, or are being asked to do too much, are obviously amenable to clinical assessment, for example, of levels of stress, but such judgements are also social ones (Walker and Fincham 2011). Deciding that work is too intense is not just a matter of employees diagnosing the causes of their own physical or psychological symptoms. Take the Britscope employees who said they could not manage to complete their schedules yet still considered themselves model employees, or the Westshire employees who were forced to come in at weekends and evenings

to cover the work of colleagues who were sick. In both cases, employees believed the level of work they were being asked to cope with was being deliberately increased by understaffing. This belief, rather than how tired or stressed they felt, was the key to their disagreement with their employer about the level of intensity of work that was appropriate. For example, at Westshire we heard many complaints of the 'overbooking' of clients in an attempt to meet performance targets and of understaffing as leavers were not replaced because budgets were cut.

Of course, managers at Westshire or Britscope saw things differently. The combination of ill-treatment and super-intense work signified a conflict over what level of work was appropriate so we would expect that the level of work which the employees complained about would be seen as perfectly reasonable. Thus managers would believe employees were attempting to limit their effort in order to keep employment higher than it needed to be to the detriment of the company and their own job security. Therefore, understanding conflicts over work intensity requires us to do more than measure workers' stress and well-being since they have a great deal to do with what used to be known as industrial relations issues about appropriate staffing levels and, even more fundamentally, what constitutes a fair day's work (Beale and Hoel 2010, 2011; Hoel and Beale 2006; Ironside and Seifert 2003; Roscigno, Hodson and Lopez 2009; Walker and Fincham 2011).

Thus far, we have been treating not only the employer as a single actor – something we shall address when we consider whether managers ever act against their employer's interests – but also employees as a homogeneous group. From our survey, we are aware that we know very well this could be misleading. Based on results for the troubled minority, roughly one in five incidents of unreasonable treatment and incivility and disrespect (and one in 10 incidents of workplace violence) took place between co-workers. In the case studies, too, we heard of ill-treatment by employees, even in relatively untroubled workplaces. At Strand, for example, we heard a white-collar employee use the term 'viper pits' when describing particular groups of blue-collar workers, and we heard a fitter describe the places where managers and engineers worked on the shop floor as 'pig pens'. We would argue, however, that managers and employers were directly implicated in much of the inter-employee conflict revealed by the survey and the case studies. For example, at Britscope we heard several complaints from employees about managerial reluctance to tackle the problem of fellow workers who were thought to be not pulling their weight. This was perceived by Strand managers to be the most common complaint made by employees, for example, as measured in employee engagement surveys. Evidence of employee concern, and indeed anger, over this perceived unfairness featured in several of our interviews.

It seems conflict between employees at Strand was actually exacerbated because it took the task of making change without initiating conflict very

seriously, and some employees saw this as unduly lenient to others. All the same, we would not expect the association between ill-treatment and reduced autonomy or super-intense work to be anything like as strong there as it was in other companies, for example, Britscope. In general, Strand appears to have been extremely reluctant to consider the ill-treatment of its employees to be a price worth paying in order to get its employees to match global standards of productivity and innovation. In the chapter on Strand, we described ways in which the relations between employers and employees might be so constituted, and so managed, that it was possible for employees to accept that a fundamental change to the way they worked was both fair and reasonable. It is possible that the employers who, unlike Strand, see trouble as a necessary but unwelcome side effect of change simply lack the capacity or competence to be able avoid it. It is also possible, as we have hinted already, that any capacity problem points to deficiencies in managers (see p. 139). We should, however, bear in mind that Strand employees earned considerably more than the majority of Britscope and Banco employees and possessed high-level skills that were valuable to their employer.

Reduced autonomy and super-intense work were not the only characteristics which were associated with ill-treatment in the BWBS. The association between all three categories of ill-treatment and all of the FARE questions was just as strong, if not more so, and this led us to similar conclusions. If people were more likely to report ill-treatment if they had not been treated as individuals, had to compromise their principles, or found the needs of their organisation always came first, this suggested there were deep-seated conflicts between employees and employers about workplace norms. If they reported that they compromised their principles but did not report ill-treatment, we must assume there was no deep-seated conflict and, perhaps, employees had low expectations of respect and fairness in the workplace.

It is important to give some examples from the case studies of the kind of conflict that can occur in respect of each of the FARE questions. There were many examples in our case studies of employees complaining of ill-treatment in relation to not being treated as individuals. For example, we were told of employers failing to recognise the special nature of a model employee's contribution and the individual needs of employees. The needs of individual employees which were not recognised by employers might be the training they needed to help them do their jobs better or needs associated with their health problems or impairments. Time after time we were told – for example, by Britscope employees – that employees with health problems were not being treated as individuals. Other examples of ill-treatment associated with not treating people as individuals concerned employers' attitudes towards their clients or customers. For example, Banco employees complained of the way they were no longer allowed to tailor their service to customers to fit their individual needs.

This example from Banco illustrates the difficulty of finding examples which apply to only one of the FARE questions, since treating customers in this way may well require an employee to compromise their principles. This is what Banco employees thought was happening when they were made to comply with the new high-pressure sales practices introduced by the company. Banco had created the conflict by telling its employees to change their relationship with their customers in a way some of them found morally objectionable. Westshire employees also reported conflict over moral principles to be a correlate of trouble at work. Many of them assured us that they were morally principled and strongly determined to defend those principles even when this led to conflict with their employer – for example, when they felt that managerial targets were placed ahead of the needs of patients or clinical priorities – and trouble at work.

Either of these cases could be used to illustrate examples of ill-treatment where employees felt the needs of their organisation always came before the needs of people, whether they be Banco customers or Westshire patients. In Westshire, for example, employees felt that managers categorised patients as a single homogenous group. Thus in Chapter 7 we gave the example of one employee who dealt with children with learning disorders, who complained that the organisation failed to take into account the varying needs of a child with autism and one suffering less severe learning difficulties. Such differences would interfere with the standardised measuring requirements of the target culture. The political impetus behind this culture may have made it easier for managers to excuse themselves from responsibility for such failures.

As in the discussion of conflict over reduced autonomy and super-intense work, we must acknowledge that the existence of conflict over the issues covered by the FARE questions means that employers will have a very different view of things to the employees who are concerned about these issues. For example, Britscope managers would argue that their sickness absence procedure was fair because it applied to all its employees in the same way, and the logic behind the three-stage warning procedure was soundly based on good practice and academic research (which led to the ubiquitous Bradford score for evaluating employee absences). Banco managers would insist that the changes they introduced were not to the detriment of their customers and had a strong business rationale. Without them they could not continue to provide the services and products their customers wanted. Westshire managers would say they were finding ways to deliver an effective public service without wasting money.

However, the example of the way Strand treated its employees or, at least, its white-collar employees, reminds us that employers can pursue their objectives without courting conflict. Perhaps this depends, however, on the kinds of objectives they have in mind and short-term goals like reducing costs which may conflict with treating people as individuals, not compromising their principles, or making sure the needs of the organisation do not always

come first. Strand was a very successful company operating in a sector where taking a medium- to long-term view was the norm. This is a good point to recall some of the work that Strand had done, with an eye to the medium to long term, to persuade its employees that they were treated as individuals, that their principles were safe at Strand and that the needs of the organisation did not always come first. While we do this, we can see that Strand was far better placed, and far better resourced, than most organisations to be able to deliver this work.

We have already reminded readers of Strand's policy on personal development which our respondents believed was fully responsive to individual needs. We remember from Chapter 8 that Strand's policy of moving employees around the company meant people could leave troubled situations but also reinforced their belief in the FARE principles; for example, they were made to feel that their development plan really was personal. We described Strand's initiatives designed to reinforce commitment to principled behaviour, and we noted that many employees volunteered that they believed Strand operated in just this way. In particular, we commented on the success of the Ethical Judgement Policy in reinforcing Strand's ethical approach to its employees even though it was designed to address other concerns, specifically Strand's approach to doing business with foreign governments. We concluded that when Strand employees believed the company behaved in a fair, rational and ethical manner they assumed that this also applied to everything they did, including things our respondents knew very little about. This had once, perhaps, also been the case in all of our cases studies, but the employees of Britscope and Westshire had largely lost their faith in their employers. At Banco, the formal commitment to ethical behaviour was as strong as ever, but some staff now believed it to be empty rhetoric.

Of course, the initiatives that Strand took to reinforce their employees' belief that the organisation's moral principles coincided with their own were also an occasion for emphasising the way in which employees were treated as individuals. We heard that, as part of the process of connecting with 'deeply held values and beliefs', Strand had to find 'ways to make every individual ... understand that what they do is important'. This meant communication had to be '*personal ... relevant for an individual*', and it was very important to Strand that this appeared to be a two-way street with managers encouraging employees to raise difficult and challenging questions. A prime example of the evidence Strand employees could point to in order to show their employer did not always put the organisation before people was the implementation of their sick leave policy. For example, in the case of the employee with clinical depression, described in some detail in Chapter 8, the health of the employee was the company's priority throughout (cf. Walker and Fincham 2011). Whatever formal policies might say, the way that sickness absence was handled in practice tended to suggest Strand had a genuine concern for its employees.

Sick leave, return to work and adjustments to work, and the workplace, were all made in order to accommodate the individual needs of employees.

These are the conditions an employer needs and, indeed nurtures, in order to avoid the generation of conflicts with its employees. For example, the presumption that most white-collar employees at Strand would make about any changes the company initiated would be that they would give no genuine cause for concern. This all sounds like a lot of work for a company to have to engage in to keep its employees onside, but we must not forget that Strand employees were ready to generalise their belief in Strand's good behaviour well beyond those occasions when they had access to some evidence to justify their faith. The conflicts that can lead to trouble at work occur because organisations fail to measure up to the commitment to rationality, fairness and respect that their employees expect, but employees are generally well disposed to believe that their expectations are being met. This is perhaps because they assume that the default settings of bureaucracies and markets – especially in 'modernity's shop window' – are always set on rationality and fairness and respect. Employees believe that emotions are irrational and dangerous and that it is reason that guarantees civility and respect. It is not religious convictions, or secular love for fellow man, that the Strand employees thank for the sympathy and forbearance and forgiveness they show each other. As they all told us, this was simply 'treating each other as adults' in the way which would be expected in a rational organisation.

We have discussed what employers can do to keep employees onside, so minimising conflicts and indirectly keeping trouble at work low, but we have not fully dealt with the question of what employers can do to avoid trouble at work. The remaining issues concern what companies can do more directly to minimise troubles at work through company policies on dignity at work and sickness absence, improving the quality of management and leadership, and managing relations with employees and the employees' relations with each other. Before this, we conclude this section by discussing those explanations of trouble at work which point outside the workplace to wider social problems. In a moment, we shall summarise what we know about the treatment of employees within the various equality strands, but first we turn our attention to the ill-treatment of employees in the public sector and violence in the workplace both within the public sector and more generally.

We mentioned, at the beginning of the chapter, that the second main sociological factor behind trouble at work concerned the risks of ill-treatment from the public when providing a public service. In Chapter 3, we learnt that public sector workers were more likely to experience incivility and disrespect, and in Chapter 4 we learnt that they were also more likely to experience violence. In both cases, we were satisfied this was largely a matter of ill-treatment from people who were not managers or fellow employees. Rather, ill-treatment originated with the clients of public service organisations and other members

of the public employees of these organisations come into contact with. Because of this ill-treatment from the public, these public sector workplaces were on a par with workplaces that were troubled for the other reasons we have already discussed: the conflicts over workplace norms occasioned over reduced autonomy, super-intense work or questions of fairness and respect. There was no evidence that any of these normative conflicts were more likely in the public sector, but the behaviour of clients and others filled the gap.

For the BWBS sample as a whole, working in the public sector made an employee much more likely to experience a variety of different types of incivility and disrespect. Within the troubled minority, being in the public sector increased the risk of being humiliated or ridiculed in connection with work. This is consistent with the idea that the troubled minority were almost all working within troubled workplaces. Employees in troubled workplaces outside the public sector also experienced incivility and disrespect and, for the most part, they experienced it to the same degree as workers in the public sector. The exception was humiliation which, we have just noted, remained much more likely in the public sector. To put it another way, a public sector workplace ended up in the category of troubled workplace because the incivility and disrespect from the public made up for the lack of incivility and disrespect from colleagues and managers. That being said, the humiliation and ridicule dished out to public service employees had no counterpart in the private or third sectors. Some service users, it seems, think that humiliation and ridicule is an appropriate response to the services they receive.

Before we go on to discuss violence in troubled workplaces, and particularly within the public sector, we need to remind readers of the way in which we are interpreting the differences between results for the troubled minority and the sample as a whole. By far the most important factors in determining whether an individual employee will be ill-treated are those which make for troubled workplaces. The impact of these factors is so great that the fine detail of further differences between troubled workplaces is largely invisible in any analysis for the sample as a whole. Once we shift to the analysis of the troubled minority – most of whom work in troubled workplaces – this fine detail becomes visible because the factors which mark out troubled workplaces are no longer dominating the picture.

Thus, in Chapter 2, we explained that it was likely that ill-treatment of the troubled minority would have different correlates for ill-treatment than the wider sample. Because members of the troubled minority were more likely to work in a troubled workplace to begin with, the factors that distinguished troubled workplaces would not show up strongly, or at all, in an analysis of the ill-treatment they experienced. Multivariate analysis of the troubled minority did not reveal the factors distinguishing a troubled from an untroubled workplace but rather what factors dictated who had the worst experience inside troubled workplaces. To make this clearer, we gave the hypothetical example

of a particular group of workers which experienced less ill-treatment because they avoided working in troubled workplaces. They might do this because they knew that in those workplaces they would certainly experience much more ill-treatment than anyone else. The result of such a pattern would be that this group suffered less ill-treatment overall but more ill-treatment when they were unfortunate enough to appear within the troubled minority.

We know now that women in the BWBS fitted this hypothetical pattern to the extent that women were more likely than men to suffer some forms of ill-treatment in troubled workplaces (see p. 77). We also know that this effect was not visible in the sample as a whole because it was masked by the factors which distinguish troubled workplaces. Women were no more likely to work in troubled workplaces than men, and having the misfortune to work in a troubled workplace was a much more important factor in determining an employee's chances of ill-treatment than anything else, including gender. This factor was so big that it could swamp a gender effect even if it was common to all workplaces. Although we shall not labour this point each time we discuss the troubled minority and troubled workplaces, readers should at least bear in mind the possibility that the detailed patterns we found within them (particularly for disability, gender, sexual orientation and ethnicity) could also apply to all workplaces. In the terms of the hypothetical example we used in Chapter 2, any one of these groups might try to avoid troubled workplaces because they expect to be particularly badly treated there. They might also suffer more ill-treatment than others in untroubled workplaces, but this effect would be masked by the effect of their avoidance of the worst workplaces.

All of the analysis of violence we have presented has, of necessity, referred to the troubled minority, so we would not expect multivariate analysis of the correlates of violence and/or injury to be able to show us those factors which distinguished those who were employed in troubled workplaces from the rest. Since the bulk of violence took place in troubled workplaces which had concentrations of all types of ill-treatment, we would expect that violence, just like unreasonable treatment and incivility and disrespect, would be greater where there was conflict over workplace norms or ill-treatment from the public. In fact, multivariate analysis showed that, even within troubled workplaces, injury from violence was more common where people were not treated as individuals. This suggests that, to some extent, conflict over these norms even served to distinguish troubled workplaces where workers experienced violence from troubled workplaces where they did not. There were greater effects from other factors, but it does seem that employers could probably do more to ameliorate workplace conditions that contribute to violence and injury from clients and other members of the public. Similarly, the association between injury and not treating people as individuals may have something to do with employees' dissatisfaction with employers' responses to injuries inflicted at work.

Within the group of troubled workplaces, violence and injury were far more likely to occur in the public sector and in workplaces with higher proportions of BME and women workers. So it was not just public service that exposed employees to violence and injury, but employment in public service workplaces which tended to employ higher proportions of BME workers and women – as might be the case in health and social care, for instance (compare to Hodson *et al.* 2006 on workplace diversity in Chapter 1). The public sector had more of the troubled workplaces where employees were exposed to violence, but this experience was not common to all the workplaces in the public sector. This makes perfect sense because we know that clients and other members of the general public were responsible for the great majority of violence and injury, and we also know that employees in some public sector workplaces have more face-to-face contact with clients and other members of the public. We also know some public sector organisations, particularly those tasked with the delivery of public services, have more potential for both conflict with clients, and others, and contact with potentially violent people.

We suggested above that employees tend to assume that the default settings of bureaucracies and markets are set on rationality and fairness and respect. Employees tend to believe that emotions are irrational and dangerous and see reason as the guarantor of civility and respect (Bauman 1991, 1993). The reasoned, restrained and temperate reaction of organisations to the incivility and disrespect, and violence and injury, meted out to some public servants is only what most of us would expect. Indeed, it is the expectation of the public servants themselves, who tend to take it in their stride as part of the job, perhaps not even recognising criminal behaviour. But just because public servants are prepared to put up with this ill-treatment, should the rest of us be? Managers were more likely to report violence and injury, but so were the associate professionals and personal service workers in health and social work, public administration and defence, and in education, some of whom were comparatively poorly paid employees. Should we really be prepared to accept that this ill-treatment is an unavoidable feature of some not very well-paid jobs in the public sector?

When we said that employers might sometimes set out to create trouble at work we were thinking, typically, of the tactics used by aggressive managers who were determined to ignore resistance from what they felt were intransigent employees. But here we have another employer, the state (or, to put it another way, all of us), creating trouble at work for its employees by exposing them to incivility and disrespect, and violence and injury. We would not deny that ill-treatment, or the threat of ill-treatment, can have an adverse effect on the quality of public services. For example, a succession of enquiries into the deaths of children who were known to social services has suggested that the public servants who might have helped to prevent these deaths were themselves intimidated by the adults responsible (for social workers' experiences of

violence, see Denney 2010; Harris and Leather 2011). Nevertheless, as we argued in relation to conflicts over norms, we would question whether a sophisticated calculation of the *net* costs to the taxpayer of the exposure of public servants to ill-treatment would suggest that this also represents trouble for the employer. Paying the hospital bills and compensation claims of injured employees and recruiting and training of replacements for those who leave their jobs to escape ill-treatment are relatively cheap compared to the cost of organising public service in such a way that the ill-treatment of public servants is reduced. Consider, for example, the expense of market solutions to issues of safety and security in education and social care. We may not be exposing public servants to trouble at work for commercial gain, but it is certainly done with an eye on the cost to the taxpayer. It might be salutary to be able to compare this cost to the (presumably paltry) cost of the dubiously effective zero-tolerance approach towards violence against public servants.

We conclude this section on who suffers from trouble at work with some discussion of the various groups of employees covered by equalities legislation. We begin with the employees with disabilities and health problems who we know were more likely to experience both unreasonable treatment and incivility and disrespect. In common with other equality strands, the presence of a disabled employee was a predictor of troubled workplaces. It might be possible that this tells us something about the kinds of organisations which employ people with disabilities or health problems, but, in common with Walker and Fincham (2011) we think the presence of employees with disabilities and health problems can lead to conflicts over workplace norms in the same way as the conflicts between employers and employees described earlier. Conflicts with employees with disabilities over the type work they are given and their performance, their rewards and entitlements, and their attendance and hours of work are all closely related to the conflicts over norms for autonomy, work intensity, fairness and respect. We might even say that these are sometimes the same issues simply recast with special reference to people with disabilities.

From an analysis of thousands of company employee engagement surveys, Schur *et al.* (2009) found that employees with disabilities did not feel more marginalised or disadvantaged in companies that all employees thought were more fair and responsive. They thought this confirmed an earlier theory which identified the fair and responsive treatment of all employees as the key to the treatment of workers with disabilities because, at least in part, employees without disabilities would not see adjustments made for workers with disabilities as special treatment. This would be another plausible reason why the presence of workers with disabilities would be a key predictor of troubled workplaces.

This analysis is particularly applicable, we believe, to employees with other health conditions. Where they were denied entitlements, or their employers were not following proper procedures, these were unambiguous signs of

conflict over norms. When it came to the analysis of the ill-treatment of employees with psychological conditions and learning disabilities, there was more suggestion of health effects. In the Britscope and Banco case studies, for example, we came across several employees whose psychological health had deteriorated because of ill-treatment. As ever, we would simply add that, often, prior psychological problems were exacerbated by ill-treatment. In this, then, some ill-treatment may be caused by the response of others in the workplace, including the employer, to disability and ill-health (Walker and Fincham 2011).

In Britscope, for instance, it seemed that employees with disabilities or health problems had endured discrimination and harassment, and we think this may also be a part of the explanation of those cases where employees with psychological problems or learning difficulties suffered incivility and disrespect. We need to bear in mind, however, that those on the receiving end were rarely aware they were being targeted because of their condition or disability. Like the rest of us, they thought the workplace was fundamentally inimical to this kind of treatment. If discrimination was an important effect, we might expect some evidence that employees with disabilities suffer greater denigration even within troubled workplaces, and we did, indeed, find they were much more likely than other employees in troubled workplaces to have to put up with people – perhaps managers, but also fellow employees – suggesting they should leave. Being told they should quit was an experience employees with disabilities shared with both LGB and BME employees. Finally, employees with psychological conditions or learning disabilities were more likely to report violence (which all took place within the troubled minority and, therefore, mostly in troubled workplaces), although a considerable part of this association might be explained by health effects.

Age was another of the equalities issues which contributed in some way to the existence of troubled workplaces. Younger workers were a little bit more likely to experience most forms of unreasonable treatment and incivility and disrespect. Though the effect was small, it was an impressively consistent result, and it seems that the presence of young workers was a contributory factor to the existence of troubled workplaces because their employment was in some way linked to conflict over workplace norms. We know from the case studies that some young workers felt they were being treated in different ways from older ones and that they believed older workers would not, in any event, stand for such ill-treatment. From the managers' point of view, and perhaps the point of view of older colleagues, differential treatment may have been seen as well-justified by younger workers' inexperience, or lack of seniority, but this simply underlines that there was a cause of conflict here. Within the troubled minority, this pattern disappeared or was actually reversed. In other words, the ill-treatment of younger workers may well be a sign of conflict over

norms, but in a workplace with this kind of conflict, young workers were no more likely to be ill-treated than others, perhaps less so.

The presence of LGB employees, like the presence of younger workers and workers with disabilities or health problems, contributed to the conditions which gave rise to troubled workplaces. As with employees with psychological or emotional problems, it was incivility and disrespect, rather than unreasonable treatment, that was the main issue. As we might expect, it would seem that the problem is not so much that the presence of LGB employees raises the possibility of conflict with employers about workplace norms. The cause of the problem looks to be much more likely to be discrimination and harassment, possibly from fellow employees, and customers or clients, as well as managers. Although we did not come across much evidence of this in our case studies, we can recall the Westshire employee who was told that she should not work with children because she was a lesbian and general remarks about homophobia amongst the overwhelmingly male workforce at Strand.

If discrimination and harassment was an important part of the story of the ill-treatment of LGB employees, we would expect this to be confirmed by the analysis of the troubled minority. As with the employees with disabilities, LGB employees were much more likely than straight workers in troubled workplaces to be told they should leave. The size of this effect was amongst the very biggest we found in any of our analyses, but it is perhaps not the most shocking evidence of discrimination and harassment. Of course, violence only applies to the troubled minority and so, even within a troubled workplace, one was far more likely to be singled out for violence if one was LGB rather than straight. As in the case of disabled employees, LGB employees rarely seem to have been aware of this discrimination and harassment. They were simply aware they were ill-treated. They did not necessarily know they were more likely to be ill-treated than straight employees and did not usually indicate they thought they had been singled out for ill-treatment because of their sexual orientation. As ever, we believe the expectation of rational and fair treatment is strong, and it takes something quite dramatic to happen before people question their default assumptions.

We were initially surprised when the BWBS showed that the presence of Asian employees was associated with *less* troubled workplaces. We noted in Part Two that many of the Asian employees in our sample were highly educated, and we suggested that the type of jobs they did might be located in less troubled workplaces. We now have the makings of a theory that Asians, and particularly highly educated Asians, tried to avoid working in troubled workplaces if they could. When we looked at the analysis of the results for the troubled minority, we found the same pattern as for the members of other equality strands. Like workers with disabilities and LGB employees,

BME employees were more likely to be told they should leave. The effect was not as spectacular as for LGB employees, but it was worse than what disabled employees had to endure. So the presence of BME employees was not generally a predictor of troubled workplaces (with the exception of the particular workplaces in the public sector where violence is more likely), but it was a predictor of who would be targeted within a troubled workplace. Although the effects were not as great as we might have expected from some of the literature discussed in Chapter 1, this was certainly evidence that minorities are targeted for ill-treatment (Lewis and Gunn 2007; Lopez *et al.* 2009; Roscigno, Lopez and Hodson 2009).

We heard a great deal about the significance of ethnicity in our most troubled case study, Britscope, and much of what we heard could be unambiguously understood as discrimination or harassment by managers or fellow employees. In the case of the shop floor at Strand, and parts of Britscope, the presence of an entrenched older white male workforce caused particular problems for BME employees and women. At Britscope we heard complaints from other BME employees, both men and women, of the behaviour of Asian employees. Although the examples of discrimination and harassment at Strand were largely historical, the company was very well aware that it continued to have low BME employment, and those who were not white British employees continued to have concerns about exclusion by their colleagues. Similar concerns were expressed at Banco. Being one of a handful of BME or women employees in a workplace dominated by older white men might have been the dramatic experience that was required to persuade people that the ill-treatment they received amounted to discrimination or harassment, but elsewhere (perhaps in Banco or Westshire) BME employees may have been less likely to reach this conclusion. Indeed, discrimination and harassment may rarely look like discrimination or harassment to those who are responsible for it. For example, at Britscope we heard of conflict over management's alleged favouritism towards BME workers for fear of being accused of racism.

The only other protected equality characteristic that was associated with ill-treatment in our analyses was gender. In contrast to disability, sexual orientation and ethnicity, gender was not a predictor of troubled workplaces (except those public sector hotspots for violence which tended to have lots of women as well as BME workers). But when we turned to our analysis of the troubled minority, that is, when we got inside the troubled workplace, we found a picture more in keeping with the view of Hearn and Parkin (2001). Women were more likely than men in troubled workplaces to be unfairly treated, insulted and also intimidated (but also less likely to be threatened). As we have already indicated in the discussion of racism, the experience of a handful of women in a largely male environment at Strand (and in some work groups at Britscope) may have been sufficiently problematic for some of them – though not all – to conclude that their ill-treatment amounted to

discrimination and harassment. For example, a black woman employee in her forties working at Britscope reported how she had experienced unwanted stroking or touching from certain male colleagues as part of a broader pattern of harassment:

He used to say things to me and that. You know, there was one night manager, I remember him, he touched me, he did touch me ... come up and started stroking me, come around and started stroking me like that. I went bright red, I did, everyone was looking yeah, thinking that us two were having an affair or something. I went bright red. Even when I first started at Britscope, there was one manger, he's not working there anymore, but he come around ... and put his arm around my waist. He did that and, I didn't know because I was quite new to it all and that, and I didn't want to get sacked because I was only a temporary worker. And I was like wondering that can't be right ... I have had male staff come up and stroke my bum as well, I've had casuals do that. You know come up and stroke my bum and I'll go no, don't.

Can employers do more to minimise the ill-treatment of their employees?

The conventional approach to this issue is to apply critical scrutiny to company policies and procedures which are meant to prevent or limit ill-treatment, or minimise the harm it causes. We have taken this approach ourselves at various points in the book. For example, we have commented on confusion in policies over what constitutes ill-treatment and on failures to communicate, operationalise or enforce policies (particularly where managers were responsible for ill-treatment). Our research has shown, however, that employers bear a heavy responsibility for ill-treatment, and we think that finding out what employers can do to minimise ill-treatment requires more than scrutiny of their policies on dignity at work. In the first part of this final chapter, we saw that employers could sometimes minimise conflict, and achieve their objectives, by carrying their employees with them. Now we shall look at what employers can do more directly to minimise trouble at work. From what we have learnt in earlier chapters, we know that other kinds of policies – on sickness and disability – may be more relevant here than policies on dignity at work. We shall also be looking at what employers can do to improve the quality of management and leadership, and at the way they manage their relations with their employees and the employees' relations with each other.

The most important conclusion we have reached in respect of dignity at work policies is that they do little to prevent ill-treatment beyond giving employees information on the sort of behaviour that might not be acceptable in the workplace. This information is primarily of use to those who already suspect they have been ill-treated – so confusion about the recognition of ill-treatment is a big problem – but we doubt it serves to prevent ill-treatment,

given how sketchy knowledge of these policies is amongst managers and others. Even when employers, like Britscope and Strand, make a determined effort to apprise their employees of their policies, employees express doubts about how much is learnt. We heard employees describing these as tickbox exercises (and even ‘sheep dipping’), which meant the employer could demonstrate good governance without enquiring too closely into what the workforce knew about dignity at work beyond the fact that their employer had good intentions. Of course, we realise this demonstration can be valuable to an employer all the same. At Strand and Banco, for example, employees’ belief in the company’s good intentions meant they gave them the benefit of the doubt when they did not really know whether an initiative was reasonable, fair and did not undermine respect.

Not only was the preventative value of dignity at work policies questioned, but so was their efficacy as a remedy for ill-treatment. We heard about the difficulty of taking action in cases where it was the word of one employee against another with no corroborating evidence. In the case of ill-treatment by managers, employees frequently assumed that no action would be taken because the manager charged with handling the complaint would side with their fellow manager. We heard several examples in which the remedy stipulated by the policy – for example, what amounted to a confrontation with the alleged troublemaker – seemed guaranteed to discourage people from acting. More generally, people did not believe that the outcomes that could be achieved by activating the policy could justify the costs to them personally of engaging in the formal process. Probably the most common reason we were given by employees for not using their employer’s dignity at work policy was that they did not want to jeopardise their chances, especially when jobs might be on the line. We were told, for example, that in these circumstances, employees’ card would be marked, or even that they would be blacklisted, if they complained. No matter whether their fears were groundless or not, several employees even struggled to talk about this subject because they feared our conversation was not as confidential as we told them it was.

The use of external agencies as the first port of call for complaints, which can be anonymous, was welcomed by some employees, though not necessarily those who had actually used the services of an EAP (employee assistance programme) call centre. Yet it is salutary that some employees who were genuinely apprehensive about discussing their employer’s attitude towards people who used the dignity at work policy talked to independent researchers like us. Would this apprehension have been so acute if these employees thought their employer was simply acting as a neutral umpire, acting fairly and reasonably to resolve cases of unpleasantness between employees? We think that the apprehension, and indeed the fear, about using dignity at work policies suggests employees did not see their employer as impartial. At the very least, there was a perception that the employer would perceive a complaint

about ill-treatment as a challenge to managerial authority. This is most obviously the case, of course, when managers are the ones responsible for the ill-treatment but, even when this is not, employees may feel, as they told us, that they do not want to stick their heads above the parapet.

These are good reasons for concluding that, as we suggested at the beginning of this chapter, dignity at work policies are not effective because they do not address the root causes of ill-treatment. Such policies are designed to deal with problems like bullying and harassment, which are conceived as pathological workplace behaviour or unhelpful responses to workplace stresses. They are not designed to deal with ill-treatment that happens for what some people see as very good reasons. When we learnt, for example, about all the causes for conflict in Britscope and how these led, in turn, to ill-treatment, we concluded that addressing ill-treatment directly, and conceiving of it simply as bullying or harassment, was beside the point. This helped us to understand why most Britscope employees found the employer's remedies for ill-treatment unsatisfactory when they actually tried to use them. In this and other workplaces, employers (and unions) bought into a limited conceptualisation of the problem and their misunderstanding of its causes led to ineffectual prescriptions. Employers like Britscope resolutely focused on inter-employee problems to the exclusion of ill-treatment by managers. Managers mainly, and sometimes only, featured in their policies as solutions to problems. It is no accident that employees did not think dignity at work policies worked where the troublemakers were managers and, indeed, feared what would happen if they tried to use the policies.

Other kinds of policies than those on dignity at work may matter rather more for the control of ill-treatment in the workplace. The Britscope policy that had the biggest impact on their employees was actually their sickness and absence policy (see the work of Cunningham, Dibben and James; Foster; and Walker and Fincham cited in Chapter 1). Much ill-treatment arose from conflict over what was seen as reasonable practice, particularly management practice, for example, in issuing warnings to employees, in line with this policy. Britscope staff thought living in fear of warnings was 'totally wrong'. These conflicts were often heightened by the fact that the ill-health and impairments employees were suffering had been caused by their employment with Britscope. At the heart of the conflicts over reasonable practice on sickness and absence was the employer's expectation of uniform treatment of employees according to standardised expectations of, for example, performance or attendance. Very often, employees felt that variations in this uniformity resulted not from acknowledging the needs of individual employees but according to the whims of individual managers (who would make inconsistent judgements about what counted as unauthorised absences, for example). There was also considerable variation, and widespread ignorance, amongst managers about the requirements of the legislation on disability discrimination, and particularly

the adjustments to the workplace, or the work itself, that could be required of employers (confirming, particularly, Foster 2007; Walker and Fincham 2011).

Similar comments were made about Banco, for example about variations between managers in what they counted as reasonable adjustments. One employee with considerable experience of trying to use the Banco policy on 'extended' or 'disability-related' absence had concluded that line managers were ill-equipped to operate the policy, and yet the division of responsibility for it between managers and HR was very unclear. Banco's formal policy implied a certain degree of sympathy with disabled employees, stating that the organisation must accept the 'unavoidability' that such employees may suffer a higher rate of sickness absence, and listing examples of reasonable adjustments which should be considered to help facilitate better attendance (such as specialist equipment and training, job redesign, flexible hours, adjusted performance measures, remote working). Indeed Banco's policy closely resembles the policy operated by Strand, about which we heard quite positive accounts in Chapter 8 (though fear of being singled out for redundancy because of a poor sickness record or disability was mentioned at both Britscope and Strand).

This, along with the variations in practices between managers in the same organisation, only serves to underline the points made in the literature about how important the operationalisation of these policies is. Being able to rely on good advice from occupational health professionals is a crucial element in this process (see Fevre *et al.* 2008). Proper operationalisation of a sickness and absence policy that is both reasonable and meets the FARE criteria is an obvious and effective way for employers to reduce trouble in the workplace, but there may be reasons why an employer would not go down this route (Walker and Fincham 2011). It is very likely in the case of Britscope that the employer thought that conflict over sickness absence was unavoidable and perhaps even desirable. As we noted in Chapter 5, there was a clear perception amongst employees that the tough enforcement of the company sickness policy was a result of edicts from the most senior management in the company. In this, the company seemed to share the standpoint of the UK government of the time, which had determined that stricter regimes were needed to police the access of citizens who were disabled or long-term sick to welfare benefits. This government's plans to introduce welfare tests for cancer patients during chemotherapy (see *The Guardian*, 6 December 2011) sounded like some of the more extreme examples of the application of Britscope's sickness policies which we heard of from its employees.

The proper communication of sickness and absence policies is obviously a vital part of their successful operationalisation. We saw earlier, in the discussion of dignity at work policies, how much of a challenge communication with employees could be. More generally, communication was felt to be a crucial area for managers in all of our case studies. In Westshire, for example, we

learnt of the way reliance on (inadequately resourced) IT hindered good communication. At Strand, we heard more positive views about IT, when it was better resourced, though there was disquiet about the redistribution of some communication and reporting responsibilities to line managers. As Chapter 8 showed, communication policies like those operated by Strand depend on good leadership and competent managers to deliver them. How much does the quality of management and leadership matter for other ways of minimising ill-treatment?

Britscope and Westshire staff frequently told us their managers were poor. At Britscope, for example, we heard numerous complaints of unprofessional, under-confident, poorly informed managers who ill-treated their employees. In fact, there was a general perception that line managers lacked the skills they needed to do their jobs well, and ill-treatment was usually blamed on incompetence, which often came into stark relief when managers were put under pressure by their superiors. At Strand, we heard of staff who were extremely competent technically but considerably less competent at managing people, and of the steps the company had taken to ensure that such staff were not given managerial responsibilities in future. Even this last example assumes that management quality is a characteristic of individuals, and this is only one side of the story.

For example, we interviewed a mental health nurse at Westshire who had been promoted to a managerial post which had become available as part of large-scale reorganisation, which meant that the kind of work he had been doing for 20 years was changing quite radically. On taking up the post, he was given responsibility for establishing a new unit which would provide mental health services in the community rather than in a clinical setting. The nature of the services, and the work involved in delivering these services, was very different from that which had been delivered in hospitals. Moreover, he was never allowed to take over managing the unit as he was moved over to set up a second unit and then a third. With a budget in excess of £1.25 m to manage, and no financial training beyond half a day provided by his employer, he found his situation extremely stressful, and his health deteriorated badly when he was called to account for having overspent his budget.

Not only was this manager not provided with sufficient training by his employer, but he had no access to IT facilities except for a two-hour, hot-desking facility that he could access on a Friday afternoon. This required a 20–30 mile round trip from his normal workplace location and with no guarantee that he could access IT kit when he got there. Things went from bad to worse when he found himself facing disciplinary threats for failing to manage his budget and for not meeting Westshire policy for completing online returns for HR data. Despite his pleas for understanding about how his job was much larger than he had expected at the time of his appointment, and with a lack of access to IT equipment, he found himself being ill-treated by his

line manager, a consultant mental health expert. On top of this, he felt he was losing his nursing skills and missed being part of a nursing team.

Stories like these should make us wary of glib judgements about managerial competence, but there has been a long tradition of criticism of British senior and executive management too. These are the levels at which the decisions were taken which made the life of the Westshire manager, and the lives of many others like him, so difficult. Unprofessional or short-sighted management has been a traditional target for many on the Left seeking to explain the problems of British industry, but the first half of this chapter has suggested we ought to be careful of concluding that employers only appear to condone trouble at work because they are put in a false position by managers who either do not understand what is in the best interests of their employer or are incapable of acting on this knowledge. Take the ill-treatment of financial advisors at Banco. Was the intention to modernise work practices, reduce salary costs and increase productivity or force them out of the organisation (Rafferty 2001; Walker and Fincham 2011)? In the former example, hints or signals that they should quit were a kind of collateral damage that the employer would rather have avoided. In the latter, managing advisors out of the door could make it much easier to move to telephone sales or even selling that part of the business. In this (hypothetical) case, trouble at work would be a means to an end, but one which an employer might not wish to acknowledge publicly.

Albeit that Westshire and other employers put their employees in impossible positions when they give them managerial responsibilities without proper training or support, the greater blame for ill-treatment might be placed on a particular style of leadership. There was a noticeable difference in the effectiveness of leadership in Westshire and Strand, for example, and the attention given to continuous improvement in the quality of leadership was evident in many of our interviews at Strand. The effectiveness of leadership is not simply a question of employing competent leaders since it also depends on the kind of relations the organisation has with its employees and the relations employees have with each other. This means, of course, that ill-treatment which sours these relations can frustrate good leadership as easily as good leadership can eliminate ill-treatment. What are the key features of the kind of relations that exist in workplaces with little ill-treatment, the white-collar workplaces at Strand and the central office functions of Banco, for example?

Trade unions were recognised for collective bargaining purposes in all of our case study organisations. Banco, for example, had a long amicable history of union involvement in all sorts of initiatives, including policies on dignity at work and sickness absence policies. Some Banco employees thought their union was too close to the company, but union cooperation had helped Banco successfully to manage redundancies before the recession. Chapter 8 described a similarly close relationship at Strand although we heard little about the union being too close to the company, particularly when it came to the representation

of the blue-collar workforce. Union sources there believed they were far more effective at dealing with trouble at work than managers (the FTWS provided evidence that trade unions are similarly effective at dealing with a wide range of problems at work – Fevre *et al.* 2009). Of course, Strand employees and managers did not necessarily share these views.

Elsewhere, we noted that Britscope employees had mixed feelings about the effectiveness of the recognised union in addressing ill-treatment. At Westshire, professional staff would first and foremost see their membership of their professional body as their primary representation rather than a general trade union. Strand's white-collar employees were much less aware of the need for a trade union than their blue-collar colleagues were. In Chapter 8, we described the way in which many white-collar staff at Strand had learnt to resent what might once have been called working-class solidarity amongst the unionised blue-collar employees. The white-collar workers shared with the Strand leadership the belief that an individualised approach to employee relations was more fair and reasonable than the collective alternative. Strand leadership considered this a favourable situation because it meant that there were going to be fewer objections to the changes they wanted to make now and in the future.

The senior HR director that we interviewed explained that, especially now that it had become a truly global company, Strand senior management were also increasingly aware of the constraints they felt this solidarity imposed on their ability to keep pace with the competition through effective leadership. As the senior HR director explained, however, when the company had a history of strong cooperation with trade unions, 'going directly to the employees' (without the prior agreement of a union) risked causing just the kind of conflict over workplace norms that Strand took pains to avoid. For the director, the need to adjust to the history and even the personalities in each local situation was simply a fact of life.

This was, in part, a comment on the quality of local trade union leadership – there had been a somewhat strained relationship with the long-serving blue-collar convenor at Longstretton – but it was also about something more fundamental: cultural differences in expectations of the relations between employers and employees. The director said that in one of Strand's key locations in the Far East, for example, 'you're comparing apples and pears in terms of the industrial history, the industrial conflict in terms of trade unionism and employers ... Well for a start you don't have the complex agreements. Your employees tend to come to the workplace with a very different attitude'. These employees were 'very much more amenable' to the rhetoric of empowerment because they saw 'things from an individual perspective' even though they did have formal collective representation. This was an aspect of the employees' 'different mindset': 'I know I am generalising, but they are coming into a role with a view that it is legitimate that the company makes money and gives

a return to shareholders.’ This made a stark contrast with the situation in other parts of the world, including the United Kingdom but also some parts of Asia, where employees would ‘recognise that you need to make money but we don’t trust that the money that you make is going to be fairly distributed’. The director thought this was why employees in these countries wanted their unions to monitor the fairness of this distribution, but of course her point could be extended beyond the distribution of rewards to all the issues of fairness and respect which we know can be so crucial to the generation of trouble at work. She summed up the emphasis in their Far East location as ‘much more an individualism and a trust and a “this is how life is” kind of methodology and thinking’.

This characterisation might equally apply to many of the white-collar employees back at Strand’s operation in Longstretton. We have noted at several points how these employees seemed to value the team-working, and continuous team-building, they were involved in at Strand (and which seemed to be one of the necessary conditions for Strand to fulfil its ambitions for effective leadership). What we have failed to emphasise is how little this team-working had in common with not only traditional collectivism but also conventional informal social ties. Strand was once a traditional paternalistic employer with its sports clubs and hobby groups and other opportunities for its employees to cement social ties outside the workplace. The notion that privatised employees who would rather not socialise with their workmates was popularised by the Affluent Worker study (Goldthorpe *et al.* 1969). It may have been less common in the 1960s than was claimed at the time (Devine 1992), but the employees we met were largely uninterested in these opportunities, and if they did meet colleagues outside the workplace these tended to be rare events at which attendance was patchy. As at Banco, regular social contact outside work tended to be limited to employees of the same age and, sometimes, gender and ethnicity. This does not suggest that informal social relations between employees were much of an antidote to ill-treatment. Indeed many employees in our case study organisations appeared to think these relationships might be one of the causes of ill-treatment and one of the obstacles to the satisfactory remedy of ill-treatment when it did occur. Most notably, many of the employees we talked to implicated informal social relations in the reproduction of sexist, racist or ageist workplace cultures.

Returning to the main thread of this brief discussion of leadership, trade unions and individualism, we find an intriguing possibility has been revealed. It seems that leaders in the three case study organisations other than Strand may not have come to terms with the implications for their organisations of the transition from collective to individualised employment relations (which the Strand leaders wanted to see spread throughout the company). The relative ineffectiveness of these organisations in minimising trouble at work may have stemmed in part from their inability to shape *managerial*

behaviour to match the individualising discourse which removes collective intermediaries and makes each employee responsible for his or her own experience of the workplace (Walker and Fincham 2011: 153). It is possible that this failure contributed to the experience of ill-treatment amongst their employees, particularly those employees who were ambitious, better paid and felt they were, or should be, valued by the company. These were the least vulnerable workers, the ones who were confident that they could prosper without the help of a trade union, and who often appeared to think that the shift from collective to individualised employment relations could not come quickly enough.

We think that there may be a great deal of potential in this argument about trouble at work arising when employers were stuck between individualised and collective models of employment relations, but there is insufficient space to develop that argument here. We can simply say that this argument contradicts the earlier discussion of trouble at work as the necessary price that must be paid to modernise unproductive work practices. For example, we discussed the idea that, when they added ill-treatment to reduced autonomy, employers were trying to wrest the initiative from relatively privileged employees, enforce the manager's right to manage and move the business on in the way they wanted to. With the addition of our idea of an imperfect adjustment to individualised employment relations, this looks like employers were using the old-fashioned tactics that might be employed when fighting a powerful trade union rather than acting as the trustworthy partner in an individualised employment relationship. It is as if these employers embraced the easy part of the new relationship, the change in the nature and aspirations of their employees, without doing the harder part of shaping their own behaviour to match the change.

To the extent that our case study research took place at the onset of a recession, we may have been encountering employers who could afford to be slow to adapt to their side of the new individualised employment bargain because falling demand, rising unemployment and general uncertainty provided very forgiving conditions for their mistakes. In more prosperous times, an employer who did not fulfil their side of the individualised bargain might suffer for it by losing its most valued employees to its competitors. At the time of writing, the UK government's plans to withdraw various employment rights, for example, rights of employees with shorter service to protection from unfair dismissal, could be seen as a way of extending further these mitigating conditions into the recovery.

Finally, there may be evidence to support this theory of employers stuck between collective and individualised models of employment relations in the results of the BWBS. We can see this evidence if we allow that the FARE questions sometimes served as measures of the success British employers were having in delivering on individualised industrial relations, particularly

to more privileged employees. If the individualising discourse was to appear authentic, it required the employer to treat employees as individuals, and show that the needs of those individuals could sometimes come before the needs of the organisation, and that employees could be allowed to act on their principles. That poor FARE scores were so highly correlated with varieties of ill-treatment might therefore suggest that ill-treatment was more common where organisations were failing to deliver on the managerial side of the bargain implied by individualised employment relations.

Conclusions

‘Trouble at work’ is not just a convenient label which can be attached to wildly different experiences in the workplace simply because these experiences are all ones we would rather avoid. If this were all there was to it, the idea of trouble at work would have limited application, but our research provides empirical evidence that the experiences we have investigated have much more in common than this. They often coincide – in the lives of individuals and organisations – and we were able to depict this in a dramatic way in Figure 2 on p. 33, which showed the overlap between unreasonable treatment, incivility and disrespect, and violence. Not only do they often occur together, but different kinds of trouble at work often have overlapping causes and similar effects. Indeed, our research suggests that these experiences may be expressions of a single phenomenon. As in the fable of the blind men and the elephant, whenever we experience one of the forms of ill-treatment which we have discussed in this book, we encounter one aspect of a much larger, multifaceted problem which is best conceptualised as trouble at work.

The private troubles that C. Wright Mills believed sociology could help turn into public issues were those in which people felt their values were under threat. In our analyses, we have tried to show how, and why, people feel this to be the case when they experience trouble at work. Employees might feel this in respect of ill-treatment from their co-workers (Pearson *et al.* 2001) or customers and clients, though violence from customers and clients was often not be interpreted in this way. It was, however, more likely that they would feel their values to be under threat in their dealings with managers and employers. We found that trouble at work showed employees that their relationship with their employer had undergone fundamental re-evaluation which had a moral element. The full significance of this re-evaluation could only be grasped when we understood the expectation employees had of fair, rational and respectful treatment in the workplace. With lower expectations, and less trust in the processes that underpin recognition in the workplace, re-evaluation might not have produced such thorough demoralisation. If recognition was haphazard and capricious, employees would not care; but they did care, deeply, how

they were judged by rational criteria. The discussion we have just concluded suggests that the rational criteria they expected to be judged by were highly individualised and that their employers were failing to keep pace with a change they had a great deal to do with initiating.

Sociologists are much more interested in conflicts between employees and employers over workplace norms, and incivility and violence from members of the public, than they are in psychological states. We have shown in this book that it makes more sense to conduct our analysis through the prism of trouble at work, rather than workplace bullying, because it is associated with the factors sociologists study, not least the moral relations of the workplace, and particularly the moral relations between managers and employees. The same applies to the clinical notion of workplace stress, which shares with bullying an emphasis on the characteristics of the individual. We would agree with Walker and Fincham (2011) that stress, like bullying, is a less useful way for sociology to conceptualise the problem in hand. In addition, we would argue that neither bullying nor stress are stable enough concepts to allow translation between the different categories such as different workplaces, occupations and societies that interest sociologists.

To sum up, concepts of bullying and stress are unable to capture all that we know about troubles in the workplace. They are shaped by psychological and medical conceptualisations and, since these conceptualisations have thus far tended to dominate the study of ill-treatment, more sociological questions which are important to our understanding of the causes and solutions of troubles in the workplace have received relatively little attention. We would also argue that over-reliance on concepts of bullying and stress, to the exclusion of more sociological approaches, threatens to make the actions of governments, employers, trade unions and other parties who are interested in reducing ill-treatment less effective than they might otherwise be. For example, well-meaning policies on workplace dignity, and therapeutic remedies for stress and the effects of bullying, have been widely adopted. In this chapter, we have suggested that there is little evidence that they make for less troubled workplaces because they do not address the root causes of trouble at work.

While the individualised nature of the concepts of bullying and stress make them less useful to sociologists than psychologists and clinicians, individualism itself may yet emerge as a highly significant factor in our theories of trouble at work. At the end of this chapter, we introduced the idea that trouble at work has appeared as an ailment of modernity because it is the fallout that employers and employees must cope with when the transition is made from collective to individualised models of employment relations. In collective times, conflicts over workplace norms did not get framed as unreasonable treatment but as issues for collective bargaining. Any incivility and disrespect that arose could also be dealt with by collective

response (as still happens at Strand), but companies that go down the individualised route – and all four of our case studies, like the vast majority of British employers, had begun this journey – dispense with the possibility of collective solutions. Trouble at work is not only an expression of industrial relations problems (as in the theories of Ironside and Seifert, and Beale and Hoel, about the predisposition of capitalist employment relations to stimulate bullying), but is also an outcome of the transformation of industrial relations with uncertain, and often unhappy, consequences for all concerned.