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Workplace Bullying: Causes, Consequences, and Intervention Strategies

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Workplace bullying is detrimental to employees and organizations, yet in a meta-analytic review of studies representing a range of countries (North America, Scandinavian, and other European), approximately 15% of employees report being victimized at work (Nielsen, Matthiesen, & Einarsen, 2010). Workplace bullying is defined as repeated exposure, over a period of time, to negative acts such as abuse, teasing, ridicule, and social exclusion (Einarsen, 2000). Researchers have traditionally conceptualized bullying to involve face-to-face interactions; however, the increasing use of technology in the workplace has seen a rise in “cyberbullying,” whereby employees may be victimized over email or social networking websites (Weatherbee, 2010). Though bullying behaviors can originate from anyone at work (e.g., coworkers, supervisors, or subordinates), more often than not, the perpetrator has more power or perceived power than the target (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002).

In addition to research examining workplace bullying, a broad literature has started to develop that examines highly related constructs, including abusive supervision (abusive behavior from supervisors; Tepper, 2000), social undermining (negative behavior that interferes with a target’s abilities to maintain positive relationships at work; Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002), and incivility (low intensity deviant acts with ambiguous intent to harm the target; Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Although these constructs all differ conceptually, meta-analytic research that compares these constructs against a series of consequences has found that, by and large, there is little to no difference in the magnitude of consequences from these different constructs (Hershcovis, 2011). As a result, we use terms like “bullying” and “aggression” interchangeably to refer to the range of aggression constructs studied in this literature. Some common examples of workplace bullying behaviors include:

- Taking away responsibility from someone or replacing it with more unpleasant tasks
- Ignoring someone’s opinions
- Persistently criticizing someone’s work
- Spreading gossip or rumors about someone
- Ignoring or excluding someone at work
- Hinting to someone that they should quit their job

Over the past 2 decades, researchers have examined extensively the predictors and consequences of workplace bullying. This body of research has found that predictors of workplace bullying typically fall into three broad categories: (a) perpetrator characteristics, (b) target characteristics, and (c) situational characteristics. Similarly, the consequences of workplace bullying have a range of costs including: (a) human costs, (b) organizational costs, and (c) spillover costs.

The purpose of this white paper is to examine the key predictors and consequences of workplace bullying within each of the above categories. We will then discuss recommendations aimed to help organizations and individuals prevent and cope with workplace bullying.

“Although personality is indeed one factor that predicts this type of behavior, workplace bullying does not occur in a social vacuum.”



Why Do People Bully at Work?

This is a simple question with a complex answer. It is tempting to assume that bullying is a function of perpetrator personality. Although personality is indeed one factor that predicts this type of behavior, workplace bullying does not occur in a social vacuum. Rather, it occurs in the context of an organizational environment that may aggravate or mitigate the incidence of workplace bullying. Workplace bullying also occurs in the context of a relationship, and both members contribute to that relationship. Therefore, the perpetrator–target relationship is likely to influence the enactment and experience of workplace bullying (Hershcovis & Reich, 2013; Hershcovis, Reich, Parker, & Bozeman, 2012). In this section, we will consider each of the three broad predictors of workplace bullying, and then we discuss how they might interact to form a more complete picture of this social phenomenon.

Perpetrator Characteristics

A popular media perspective on workplace bullying often assumes that the main reason why someone engages in workplace bullying is because, well, the person is a bully! There is good evidence to suggest that perpetrators exhibit common, typically negative, personality traits such as narcissism (Penney & Spector, 2002), trait anger (Hershcovis et al., 2007), vengefulness (Douglas & Martinko, 2001), and trait anxiety (Fox & Spector, 1999). Perpetrators are also more likely to have a history of being targeted with bullying (e.g., Hauge, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2009). Further, the common belief that those who pick on others do so because of their own low self-esteem seems to have at least some support in the literature as researchers have found that perpetrators of negative workplace behaviors tend to report lower core self-evaluations (Ferris, Rosen, Johnson, Brown, Risavy, & Heller, 2011) and lower organization-based self-esteem (Ferris, Spence, Brown, & Heller, 2012).

Although there seem to be some common characteristics of perpetrators, a large body of research has argued that contextual factors play a strong role in the enactment of workplace bullying. That is, while certain negative personality traits seem to make individuals more reactive, workplace bullying tends to thrive in certain environments (discussed below). Therefore, designing selection systems that rule out potential employees based on personality traits may be misguided. First, employees are unlikely to answer honestly questions about the extent to which they exhibit characteristics such as high trait anger or neuroticism. Second, as we note below, targets of workplace bullying tend to exhibit many of the same characteristics as perpetrators (Hershcovis & Reich, 2013). Therefore, selection systems may inadvertently weed out the wrong individuals. Third, organizations have much more control over the organizational environment that they create than they do over the personality traits of their employees. As a result, it seems that organizational attention would be better placed in fostering a positive work environment than in attempting to select out potential perpetrators.

Target Characteristics

Research on workplace bullying and aggression has not only focused on the traits and characteristics of perpetrators, it has also examined the traits and characteristics of targets. Research on victim precipitation (Olweus, 1978) has argued and found that certain employees, by virtue of their characteristics and traits, may be at higher risk of workplace bullying than other employees. This body of research has also found that sometimes such traits lead employees to perceive workplace bullying where there is none.

Interestingly, a sizable body of research has demonstrated that targets exhibit many of the same traits as perpetrators (Hershcovis & Reich, 2013). This research has found that targets tend to have higher levels of trait anger and anxiety (Vie, Glasø, & Einarsen, 2010), tend to have higher levels of negative affectivity (Tepper, Duffy, Henle, & Lambert, 2006), and tend to be more disagreeable (Milam Spitzmueller, & Penney, 2009) compared to non-targets. There also seems to be some evidence that targets of workplace bullying are both higher in cognitive ability (Kim & Glomb, 2010) and conscientiousness (Lind, Glasø, Pallesen, & Einarsen, 2009). These surprising findings suggest that employees may punish overperforming coworkers in an effort to force them into lowering the bar.

In addition to exhibiting certain traits, “high risk targets” also seem to engage in certain behaviors that may aggravate perpetrators. For instance, Tepper, Moss, and Duffy (2011) found that when supervisors perceive that subordinates are different from themselves, those differences lead to higher levels of relationship conflict, which in turn is associated with higher levels of abuse from the supervisor towards the subordinate. Interestingly however, this mediated relationship was stronger when supervisors perceived subordinates to be lower performers. That is, low performing subordinates seem to be at higher risk of mistreatment from supervisors.

The idea of examining how victim characteristics and behaviors precipitate aggression may be viewed as victim blaming. However, as noted by Hershcovis and Rafferty (2012), aggressive behaviors at work occur within the context of a social relationship, and both parties to that relationship contribute to its dynamic. Understanding the factors that may put employees at higher risk of mistreatment is important to bullying prevention. For instance, if we know that performance is a risk factor, then ensuring proper supervisory training to steer supervisors away from abusive behaviors and toward more constructive performance management approaches is likely to both reduce abusive supervision and ultimately improve employee performance.

“Interestingly, a sizable body of research has demonstrated that targets exhibit many of the same traits as perpetrators.”



Situational Characteristics

One of the most frequently studied predictors of workplace bullying is the situational or contextual factors that might influence aggression in an organization. In fact, “situational constraints” have been found to be one of the strongest predictors of workplace aggression (Bowling & Beehr, 2006).

“...Researchers have found that job insecurity and role stressors such as low job autonomy and high workload are associated with being both a perpetrator and a target of workplace bullying.”

Stressful work environments seem to foster conditions that make workplace bullying more likely to occur. For example, researchers have found that job insecurity (De Cuyper, Baillien, & De Witte, 2009) and role stressors such as low job autonomy and high workload (Baillien, De Cuyper, & De Witte, 2011) are associated with being both a perpetrator and a target of workplace bullying. Similarly, meta-analytic findings suggest that role conflict, role ambiguity, low autonomy, and high work constraints (Bowling & Beehr, 2006) are higher among targets than nontargets of workplace aggression; however, the direction of these effects is not entirely clear (see, for example,

Hauge, Skogstad & Einarsen, 2011). Interestingly, Bruursema, Kessler, & Spector (2011) found that boredom also predicts workplace aggression, suggesting that managers need to balance workload such that employees have enough work to keep them out of trouble but not too much work that they become reactive due to stress.

Leadership style has emerged as another important situational factor. For example, perpetrators of workplace bullying tend to report having leaders who are less charismatic (Hepworth & Towler, 2004) and more abusive (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007), and targets tend to report having leaders who are less fair and supportive (Hauge, Einarsen, et al., 2011). Noncontingent punishment and tyrannical and laissez-faire leadership styles have also been found to relate to perceptions of bullying (Hauge, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2007; Hoel, Glasø, Hetland, Cooper, & Einarsen, 2010; Skogstad, Einarsen, Torsheim, Aasland, & Hetland, 2007). It seems that leaders who adopt these styles may portray a seemingly permissive stance on workplace aggression.

Finally, meta-analytic evidence shows that workplace injustice is another key predictor of aggressive behavior at work (Hershcovis et al., 2007). The organizational justice literature

focuses on three main types of justice. Interpersonal justice refers to the quality of the interpersonal treatment people receive when supervisors make decisions and implement procedures (Bies & Moag, 1986). Procedural justice refers to the fairness of the procedures used to determine organizational outcomes (Leventhal, 1980). Finally, distributive justice refers to the fairness of the actual outcomes and decisions made by supervisors (Adams, 1965). Hershcovis et al. found that all three forms of injustice were related to employee aggression; however, interpersonal injustice had the strongest relationship with employee aggressive behavior, followed by procedural and then distributive justice. In other words, perhaps contrary to popular belief, employees appear to be more concerned with the respect and dignity with which supervisors communicate outcomes and decisions than they are about the fairness of the outcome itself. In sum, bullying behaviors seem to flourish in workplaces that are characterized by high demands, low resources, and ineffectual leaders.

What Are the Consequences of Workplace Bullying?

Workplace bullying has clear significant and adverse consequences not only for employees but also for organizations and society more broadly. Below, we discuss three broad categories of consequences: human, organizational, and spillover/crossover.

Human Costs

Targets of workplace bullying experience significant detriments to their health and well-being. These individuals report increased psychological distress including anxiety, depression (e.g., Hauge, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2010; Hansen et al., 2006), negative emotions (Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Vie, Glasø, & Einarsen, 2012), and overt anger (Aquino, Douglas, & Martinko, 2004). Targets also report higher levels of burnout and emotional exhaustion (e.g., Wu & Hu, 2009).

Recent research has also linked the experience of bullying to physiological outcomes, including sleep problems (Niedhammer et al., 2009), musculoskeletal complaints (Vie et al., 2012), and lower salivary cortisol (Hansen et al., 2006). In fact, several researchers have



suggested that targets of workplace bullying experience symptoms similar to those associated with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2004). Matthiesen and Einarsen found that victims of bullying exhibited higher levels of PTSD than a series of non-bullied high trauma control groups (e.g., recently divorced persons, war zone personnel). Thus, there is no question that there are serious adverse health consequences for victims of bullying.

Interestingly, targets are not the only ones who suffer from and react to workplace mistreatment. Studies have found that witnesses also experience negative reactions to workplace aggression, such as lower general and mental stress (Vartia, 2001), and emotional drain (Totterdell, Hershcovis, Niven, Reich, & Stride, 2012). More recently, Reich and Hershcovis (in press) found that employees who witness mistreatment become angry toward and punish perpetrators. Therefore, it appears that incidents of mistreatment extend beyond the target to affect others in the work environment and that, consistent with Andersson and Pearson's (1999) concept of an incivility spiral, mistreatment may move beyond the original perpetrator–target dyad to involve others at work.

Organizational Costs

The human costs of workplace bullying discussed above have obvious implications for organizations, as targets experiencing emotional and physiological impairments are more likely to be absent due to sickness (e.g., Kivimäki, Elovainio, & Vahtera, 2000; Sprigg, Martin, Niven, & Armitage, 2010). Further, those targets who continue to attend work demonstrate lower task performance (Harris, Kacmar, & Zivnuska, 2007; Schat & Frone, 2011), lower creativity (Mathisen, Einarsen, & Mykletun, 2008), lower organizational citizenship behaviors (e.g., Harris, Harvey, & Kacmar, 2011; Zellars, Tepper, & Duffy, 2002), and higher counterproductive work behavior (e.g., Hershcovis et al., 2012).

Organizations incur indirect costs as well, as meta-analytic results suggest that targets of workplace bullying report lower job satisfaction, life satisfaction, and organizational commitment, and higher intentions to quit (Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Hershcovis & Barling, 2010). These negative job attitudes further relate to performance outcomes (e.g., Schat & Frone, 2011). As such, it should be unsurprising that workplace bullying in the United States costs organizations as much as \$14,000 USD per employee in lost performance (Pearson & Porath, 2009).

Spillover/Crossover Costs

In the last 10 years, an interesting body of research has started to examine spillover and crossover effects arising from workplace bullying and aggression. Crossover refers to how

one individual's experiences can influence a different individual's experiences (Westman, 2006), and thus is an interindividual phenomenon. For instance, experiences of abusive supervision for a target (person A) may influence the attitudes of the target's coworker (person B) toward the work environment. In contrast, spillover refers to the extent to which an individual's participation in one domain influences his or her participation and attitudes in another domain (Carlson, Ferguson, Perrewé, & Whitten, 2011), and thus is an intraindividual phenomenon. That is, an individual's experience in the workplace (context A) influences the individual's experience in another context such as the home environment (context B). For example, experiences of abusive supervision may influence an individual's engagement with family activities.

Haines, Marchand, and Harvey (2006) examined crossover effects by showing adverse health effects on the spouses of workplace aggression targets after controlling for a range of other stressors. Tepper (2000) found that experiences of abusive supervision affects subordinates' experiences of work–family conflict, suggesting that abusive supervision can spillover into another domain. In a particularly well-designed study, Hoobler and Brass (2006) obtained data from supervisors, subordinates, and family members to show that when supervisors experience a psychological contract violation at work, their subordinates are more likely to report abusive supervision (crossover) from that supervisor. In turn, the subordinate's family members are more likely to report family undermining from the subordinate (crossover). In other words, aggression can “trickle down” such that when supervisors feel unfairly treated by their organizations, they may be more likely to abuse their employees, who in turn go home and are more likely to abuse their family members. Most recently, Carlson et al. (2011) found that abusive supervision ultimately influences subordinate family function and satisfaction through relationship tension. This body of research demonstrates the power of workplace mistreatment to extend beyond its relational context and beyond organizational borders.

“...Researchers have found that job insecurity and role stressors such as low job autonomy and high workload are associated with being both a perpetrator and a target of workplace bullying.”

Cultural Considerations

The prevalence estimate provided at the outset of this paper is based on a meta-analytic review summarizing studies conducted across a range of countries (Nielsen et al., 2010); however, these estimates vary across countries. Nielsen et al. reported that only 9.7% of Scandinavian employees experience workplace bullying, whereas prevalence rates are 15.7% in other European countries and almost 26% in Non-European countries (primarily

North America). Relatedly, according to the 2010 European Work Condition Survey (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2010), the percentage of employees who feel that they have been subjected to bullying or harassment at work (within the past year) ranges between 0.6% (Bulgaria) to 9.5% (France).



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One reason for these differences may be due to legislation, or lack thereof. For instance, Sweden and France were the first European countries to enact legislation to address workplace bullying (in 1993), closely followed by Norway, Denmark, and the Netherlands. In contrast, North America has been comparatively less responsive. In Canada, only 3 of the 10 provinces (Quebec, Saskatchewan, and Ontario) have anti-bullying legislation, with Quebec being the first to introduce such legislation in 2004. At this writing, although several states have attempted to introduce legislation to address workplace bullying, none of these laws has been enacted.

A second reason for this variation across countries may be that behaviors operationally defined as “bullying” in one cultural context may not be defined as bullying in another (Bond, 2004). According to Nielsen, Hetland, Matthiesen, and Einarsen (2012), “the effect of workplace bullying on subsequent distress is mainly explained by the subjective feeling of being victimized by the bullying, and not by mere exposure to bullying behaviors” (p. 42). That is, the negative effects of bullying are due to the meaning individuals ascribe to it, which is constructed by the cultural context (Bond, 2004). Indeed, in a cross-cultural study, Severance et al. (2013) found only two dimensions of “aggression” (i.e., damage to self-worth and direct versus indirect) generalized across their study sites of Israel, Japan, Pakistan, and the United States.

Cultural variation in perceptions of (and reactions to) workplace bullying are becoming increasingly apparent. For example, a recent study by Giorgi, Leon-Perez, and Arenas

(2014) of workplace bullying in Italy hypothesized and found a curvilinear relationship between workplace bullying and job satisfaction; specifically, among Italian workers, job satisfaction was lowest when workplace bullying was moderate. Giorgi et al. argued that, because bullying is common in Italian workplaces (Giorgi, 2009), it is normalized and may even signal membership in the in group. Loh, Restubog, and Zagenczyk (2010) also found cultural differences in employee reactions to workplace bullying; these authors attributed the stronger negative relationship between bullying and job satisfaction among Australian workers compared to Singaporean workers to the latter's relative comfort with an unequal distribution of power (i.e., low power distance). These differences in employee perceptions and reactions highlight the complexity of studying workplace bullying, as well as the need to tailor interventions to their national, industrial, and organizational cultural context.

What Can Organizations and Victims Do About Workplace Bullying?

Below, we discuss the three distinct ways in which organizations and employees can deal with workplace bullying: primary, secondary, and tertiary interventions.

Primary Interventions

Primary interventions focus on preventing occurrence of bullying in the workplace. Although there have been relatively few rigorous tests of such interventions (presumably because of the costs involved in designing and implementing programs), at least two large scale tests have been reported. Hoel and Giga (2006) tested the efficacy of policy communication, stress management training, and negative behavior awareness training, in comparison to a control group. However, no clear gains were observed across a 6-month period. In contrast, research into the Civility, Respect, Engagement in the Workforce (CREW) program has reported much more promising results. CREW began in 2005 in the US Department of Veteran Affairs and involves a series of participatory exercises (e.g., discussions, role plays), which are designed to cultivate awareness of one's interpersonal impact in the workplace. Studies using a robust randomized control trial design have reported significant improvements in the civility of workplace behavior, sustained across 12-months (Osatuke, Moore, Ward, & Dyrenforth, & Belton, 2009), and additional gains for job satisfaction, organizational commitment, trust in management, and job burnout (Leiter, Day, Gilin-Oore, & Laschinger, 2012).

Research concerning situational characteristics that contribute to the occurrence of bullying may also provide fruitful avenues for future interventions. As discussed earlier, factors such as role ambiguity, high demands, poor leadership, and perceived injustice influence the likelihood of bullying. As such, creating systems that can: (a) ensure role clarity and reasonable workloads, (b) offer leadership training that encourage supportive leadership

styles, and (c) generate policies to ensure fair and just treatment, decisions, and outcomes may all help to reduce the prevalence of workplace aggression and bullying.

Secondary Interventions

Secondary interventions aim to provide employees with the necessary skills and/or coping resources to deal with bullying should it occur. Although researchers have yet to test the efficacy of secondary interventions in reducing the negative effects of bullying, recent studies have suggested a number of potentially promising routes for such interventions. For example, Zapf and Gross's (2001) work suggests that people who successfully cope with bullying differ from unsuccessful copers in how they manage conflict. In particular, successful copers are better at recognizing and avoiding escalating behavior. Similarly, Niven and colleagues' work on emotion regulation suggests that strategies that employees use to manage their own emotions in response to being aggressed against appear to be important factors influencing the severity of consequences for employees' health and well-being. Reappraising the aggression (e.g., by trying not to take people's actions personally) is an adaptive response, buffering the negative effects of aggression, whereas suppressing one's emotional response and engaging in ruminative thinking (where one continually mulls over what happened in a negative manner) are maladaptive responses, exacerbating negative consequences (Niven, Sprigg, & Armitage, 2013; Niven, Sprigg, Armitage, & Satchwell, 2013).

Tertiary Interventions

Tertiary interventions focus on reducing negative consequences after bullying has occurred. It is crucial for organizations to respond appropriately once bullying has been reported; reporting of victimization can lead to negative consequences for targets because of poor organizational responses, such as minimizing what has happened (Bergman, Langhout, Palmieri, Cortina, & Fitzgerald, 2002). One way the organization can respond is to use workplace mediation, in which a third party to the conflict (e.g., an external consultant or a member of HR staff) gets both the alleged perpetrator and victim together to work through the situation in a facilitated discussion, focusing on the present and future relationships. Saam's (2010) study, in which consultants were interviewed about the strategies they preferred to deal with workplace bullying, identified that mediation can be useful to prevent escalation, primarily when a situation is viewed as a conflict rather than full-blown bullying. However, when a behavior pattern has become entrenched, mediation may be inappropriate due to the power imbalance that develops between perpetrator and victim. Organizations can also consider administering sanctions to perpetrators (e.g., moving them to a different department, demoting or even firing them); however, because bullying cases are often "he said-she said" in nature, sanctions can be difficult to justify legally.

An alternative, or complementary, approach is the provision of counselling or debriefing. Usually these services are offered for targets of bullying, in which the target talks about what happened with a professional, who then guides the target through various possible solutions. In Tehrani's (2003) review of tertiary approaches, she concluded that there is some evidence of long-term benefits for individual victims but that there are a variety of counseling and debriefing types and for which there is no clear evidence to suggest that any particular approach is more effective than others. Moreover, there can be a danger that such interventions may not allow victims to distance themselves from the events. Counselling can also be offered to perpetrators of bullying, although this approach is much less common.

Practical recommendations

- Training to raise awareness of people's interpersonal impact in the workplace may help to promote a more civil work environment
- Training can also provide employees with the skills to cope with stressors and to regulate their emotions in the workplace, to reduce the chance of bullying occurring and to promote more adaptive responses to conflict, should it occur
- Organizations should foster a positive culture and eliminate situational factors that promote workplace aggression, such as work overload, role ambiguity, and workplace injustice
- Manager training should be provided to ensure that managers are fair and supportive to reduce the likelihood of bullying and to empower employees to feel able to report it
- Managers must also acknowledge bullying as a real issue in the organization and explicitly support interventions or training programs if they are to succeed
- Clear policies and standards for acceptable behavior should be set and communicated within organizations, with clear procedures for reporting of and dealing with incidents
- Workplace mediation may prove a useful intervention strategy early on in a conflict situation and in cases where there is not a clear power imbalance between the perpetrator and victim
- Offering counselling or debriefing for targets (and even perpetrators) of bullying can be helpful, but such interventions must focus on adaptive coping to avoid trapping targets in negative, ruminative thinking cycles

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