



Bullying in the workplace: Significant indicators

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Abstract:

Bullying in the workplace is considered as a serious issue in so many societies all over the world. Even if a person escaped bullying at school in his childhood as a pupil, he could still find himself the target of this spiteful, offensive, and intimidating behavior in workplace. Noting that causes of bullying are almost similar for everyone, regardless of the environment in which it occurs, but the specificity of the workplace indicates that the perpetrator of the mobbing (bully) is often the boss or the coworker. It can lead to health concerns, undue stress, and low productivity at work. However, the good news is there are practical measures an employee can take if he/she is experiencing bullying at work. In t is paper, we work on understanding the state of bullying/ Mobbing, and why people do such a behavior so the victim can protect him/ herself of being hurt.

Key words: state of bullying, workplace, causes of bullying, indicators.

Introduction:

It is said that; if you have to deal with a bully at some point in your career; you know first hand it can be a soul-crushing experience straight from Dante's Inferno. It makes you count down the days until the week's end. And it muscles your stomach to do a 360 when Monday arrives.

I. Historical background:

Before we involve in dealing with the phenomenon of bullying at work, we rather intend to shed some light on the history in which bullying built and shaped. So we find it difficult to identify its origin because the early descriptions were characterized of coercive and destructive behaviors within armies, monasteries, households and guilds. However, it is only with the industrial revolution and the move away from the cottage industries to labor intensive factories, foundries and offices that bullying has had the opportunity to develop within the workplace. Its appearance was recognized by the negative effect of bullying and cautioned by what the Roman legions were well known for their way in dealing with soldiers harshly, with floggings, breaking of bones and death sentences; in reason of enforcing discipline, particularly among those in lower ranks (Fields, 2006).

In the sixteenth century Machiavelli wrote his influential political treatise *The Prince*, dealing with the acquisition and maintenance of power. Machiavelli posed the following question: 'Is it better for a leader to be loved or feared?' His response was 'It is far safer to be feared than loved when one could not do both.' In Britain, Mrs. Beeton (2000) provided nineteenth-century women with advice on how to manage their households. She criticized the abuse of servants and advised her readers that servants should be treated as reasonable human beings with no excuses being made for their shortcomings.

At the beginning of the twentieth century Robert Tressell (2008) described the plight of a young woman in domestic service as a series of petty tyrannies, insults and indignities and years of cruelly excessive work which began two or three hours before the rest of the household were awake and only ended when she went exhausted to bed, late at night. Tressell also drew on his own experiences of working as a house painter in his description of bullying and oppression suffered by building workers where the older workers were constantly in fear of losing their jobs. An even more extreme bullying was found in the experiences of children working down mines, in textiles and other manufacturing industries.

Interviews undertaken in the mid-nineteenth century by the Earl of Shaftsbury showed that the children were regularly beaten and bullied as they toiled by day and often at night in conditions of Dickensian squalor (Barkham, 2007). Up to 50 years ago fear was still a predominant feature of working life, with workplaces being hierarchical and autocratic, exposing workers to demeaning and oppressive behaviors with impunity, and It is only by a recent time that western society has begun to recognize that bullying in the workplace is unacceptable and a cause of distress, illness and reduced productivity.

II. Understanding bullying at work:

II.I. Definitions:

Bullying is used to cover a range of negative interpersonal behavior that is observed in the work environment. There are many definitions of bullying; but there is one most useful was developed by Einarsen and colleagues. It refers to the involvement of repeated negative actions and practices that are directed to one or more workers. The behavior is unwelcome to the target and undertaken in circumstances where the target has some difficulties in defending himself/ herself. The behavior may be carried out as a deliberate act or unconsciously. This behavior causes humiliation, offence and distress to the victim.

So to Einarsen; 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)

Psychologically speaking; Bullying at work can be both distressing and damaging to the person's mental health, confidence and self-esteem. What begins as gentle teasing can sometimes progress into a much more serious form of harassment (Leuis Winehouse.2022).

Bullying can occur if a team member is considered to be weaker than others or because the bully feels threatened by the victim's competency or strength. Sociological studies show that nearly everybody has experienced some level of bullying in the workplace at some time. However, it can be difficult to define or prove.

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).

II.II. Bullying relation to common concepts in the workplace:

It is important to know which relation occurs between bullying and other concepts which are near in meaning and used in the workplace; they have many similar characteristics that may probably create an area of confusion to the victim suffering from a bad or harsh behavior from a perpetrator. Such behavior usually makes an uncomfortable state of self esteem, and may lead to an unhealthy work environment. The figure below shows the most interconnected terms and concepts reflecting bullying at work.

Figure1. Most interconnected terms and concepts reflecting bullying at work.



From MAHealthyWorkplace.com

III. Causes of bullying:

The main question one surely asks is: 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 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).

Psychologically speaking, there is an assumption that the main reason why someone engages in workplace bullying is because, 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. Perpetrators are also more likely to have a history of being targeted with bullying. 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 and lower organization-based self-esteem (Ferris, Spence, Brown, & Heller, 2012).

So, people become bullies because:

- They want to have control over others.
- They want to improve their social status.
- They don't feel very good about themselves, and want others to feel as bad as they do.
- They are angry or frustrated about something and take it out on others.
- They have been bullied themselves in another setting, and bullying gives them back their feeling of power.

To recapitulate, a rather popular view is that these types of behaviors are deeply rooted within the personality structure of the workplace bully. However, not much empirical evidence exists for this notion. Yet, in one study Matthiesen and Einarsen did, they found that self-reported bullies described themselves as being high on aggressiveness and low on self-esteem, the latter being particularly true for a group of offenders who also saw themselves as a target of bullying (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2005). Thus, these perpetrators, labeled as provocative targets, were also found to be low on social competence and high on social anxiety.

A controversial issue in this research is the role of the victim personality. Studies indicate that such factors may in fact play a role, at least in the victimization process resulting from exposure to bullying behaviors in the workplace, and at least in some of the cases. A study of personality and personality disorders took place in 2001; among 85 Norwegian victims of bullying at work using a comprehensive measure of personality led by both Matthiesen and Einarsen revealed some interesting insights:

As a group, victims portrayed a personality profile indicating a tendency to emotional and psychological disturbance on a wide range of personality factors. However, the study showed that victims of bullying were not a homogeneous group. One group of victims portrayed a profile indicating an extreme range of severe psychological problems and personality disturbances.

This group, called the “**seriously affected**”, reported a range of emotional and psychological problems although they reported a relatively low exposure to specific bullying behaviors, a finding indicating that personality is important in determining how bullying is experienced and how it is reacted to.

These victims were depressive, anxious, suspicious, uncertain of themselves, and troubled by confused thoughts. A second group, called the “**disappointed and depressed**” portrayed a tendency towards becoming depressed and being suspicious of the outside world.

The third group, called the “**common group**”, portrayed a quite normal personality, in spite of having experienced the largest number of specific bullying behaviors. Such results may indicate that a specific vulnerability/hardiness factor may exist among some, but not all victims of bullying at work.

Persons who are already suffering from psychological problems are probably more likely to suffer long-term psychological and physical problems in the wake of bullying and serious personal conflicts.

Persons with psychological problems, low self-confidence and a high degree of anxiety in social situations may also be more likely than others to feel bullied and harassed, and they

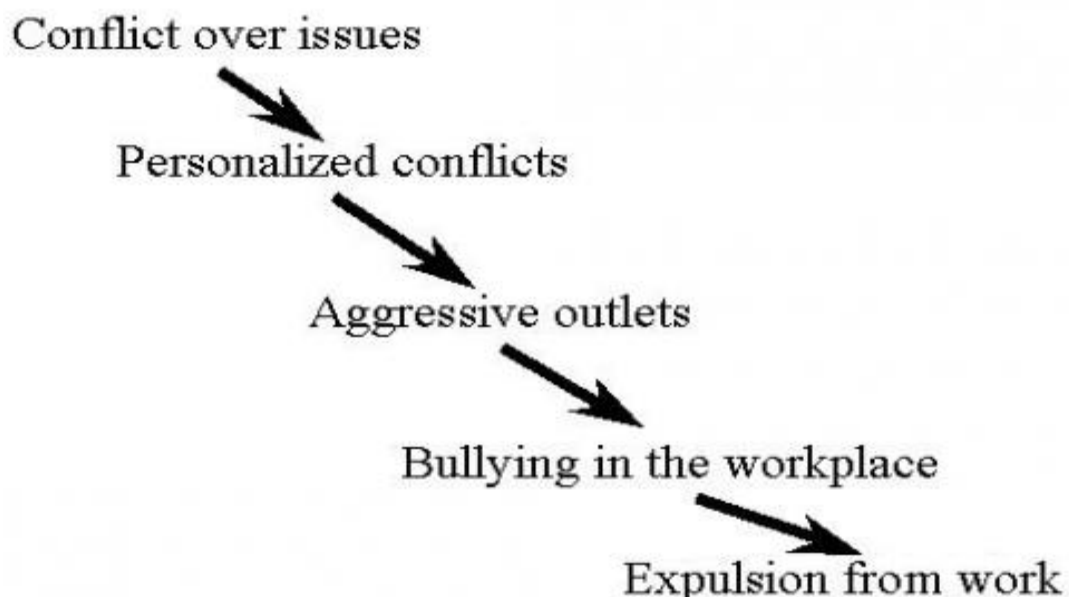
may find it more difficult to defend them if they are exposed to the aggression of other people. However, a caution must be put forward.

Interviews with victims as well as case studies (Einarsen *et al.*, 1994) reveal that bullying seems to exist only in organizational cultures that permit or reward such kinds of behavior (see also Einarsen *et al.*, 2003). Bullying will only take place if the offender feels he or she has the blessing, support, or at least the implicit permission of his superiors to behave in this manner (Brodsky, 1976). In some organizations, bullying may even be institutionalized as a part of leadership and managerial practice. Authoritarian leadership styles are still highly valued in many companies (Hoel & Salin, 2003). Blaming it all on the “psychopaths at work” or even a “neurotic” victim is therefore in most cases a too simplistic solution to the problem of why bullying takes place.

In addition to the values and norms prevailing in the organizational culture, the quality of the psychosocial work environment seems to be an important cause of bullying. A work situation characterized by role conflict and a lack of interesting and challenging work tasks, combined with a negative interpersonal climate in the work group, seems to be a high risk situation for bullying (Einarsen, 2005). A high degree of ambiguity or incompatible demands and expectations about roles, tasks and responsibilities may create a high degree of frustration and conflicts within the work group, especially in connection with rights, obligations, privileges and positions. This situation may then act as a precursor of conflict, poor inter-worker relationships, and a need for a suitable scapegoat, especially if the social climate is characterized by low trust and interpersonal tension.

A typical characteristic of workplaces where bullying prevails is also low satisfaction among many employees regarding the leadership style of their managers and supervisors; it is either too aggressive or too laissez-faire. In fact, it was estimated that about 50 % of bullying victims claim to be bullied by a superior, again linking bullying closely to leadership. These findings can be summarized by Leymann's (1993) theoretical claim that four factors are prominent in eliciting bullying at work: (1) deficiencies in work design, (2) deficiencies in leadership behavior, (3) a socially exposed position of the victim, and (4) a low moral standard in the department.

Figure2. Different stages involved in the escalation process of dispute-related bullying



From Einarsen, 2005

IV. Studies ‘statistics measuring bullying behavior:

The statistics vary from one study to another; According to several studies conducted across a range of countries on bullying behavior at work, (Nielsen et al., 2010); they assume the 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 “...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.”

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). 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.

However; according to Max Woolf’s survey, the majority of bullies aren’t bosses as typical suspects. In over 50% of cases, bullying comes from coworkers. The findings show 79% of working professionals have indirectly experienced or witnessed bullying at work (78% of women vs. 80% of men). Another 66% of employees have personally become victims of workplace bullying (69% of women vs. 63% of men). While that number might seem high, it goes hand-in-hand with similar studies on the topic (Max woolf.2021).

- Coworkers – 52%
- Direct managers – 33%
- External managers – 8%
- Other company employees – 6%

Upon closer examination of the data, it is also uncovered that younger employees who don’t have much experience under their belt are more often bullied by coworkers than veteran employees. Here’s how the amount of bullying that comes from peers and coworkers declines with more work experience:

- 1–2 years – 61%
- 3–5 years – 54%
- 6–10 years – 52%
- 11–20 years – 49%

It is estimated 72% of bullying cases are carried out by somebody in a managerial position of the people that have experienced bullying and unreasonable behavior in the workplace, 44% go on to suffer depression, 41% experience anxiety and a third of people who have been bullied claim to have had thoughts of suicide which have been directly attributable to the bullying. 1 in 5 people have taken time off work as a result of bullying and nearly half of them say it affects their performance negatively whilst they are at work.

V. Types of bullying :

Bullying can rain down from nearly any place within an organization or institution. It can also take different forms.

Here are the most common types of workplace bullying (Luis Winehouse.2022):

- Ongoing criticism – 60%; Being picked on or getting regularly undermined, it happens when an employee is working to a satisfactory standard but still faces criticism and is undermined by managers or coworkers then this can be considered as harassment as there is no true basis for the criticism.

- Malicious rumors and gossip – 30%; It is not uncommon for rumors and gossip to circulate in the workplace environment. If the rumors are spread with malice and this does damage to a person's reputation then this can be considered harassment at work.
- Having someone interfere with your work – 29%.
- Receiving aggressive texts, emails, or phone calls – 23%.
- Getting your work sabotaged – 12%; Removing the opportunity for promotion or the possibility of training to enhance skills. Although hard to prove this is still counted as a form of bullying, albeit in a passive way. There is no attempt to cause active harm but seek to reduce the opportunities that the employee has access to in the workplace.
- Unequal treatment to female employees; Women are more picked on and undermined than men (66% vs. 55%). Perhaps, that's because some women find it harder to stand their ground against a bully, lacking men's self-assuredness.

V. I. The significance of gender in the prevalence of bullying at work

As a matter of fact, there are some people more likely at risk than others. Women seem to experience a higher level of bullying than men and it would appear to be targeted more readily at victims over the age of 40. They may receive messages containing sexist or discriminatory remarks, micromanaging every detail of work the female does.

Workplace bullying is not necessarily restricted to teammates and a large percentage of complaints are made against people in managerial positions.

More women than men claim that they have been bullied at work with 57% of women saying they have experienced bullying. The figures are even higher for transgender individuals, 59% state that they have been harassed at work.

Unequal treatment to female employees; everybody has a right to be treated equally at work. If a member of staff feels as though they are being singled out for unfair treatment and are experiencing different treatment to the other people around them then they may be able to claim compensation for workplace bullying due to discrimination at work. In this context, women are more picked on and undermined than men (66% vs. 55%). Perhaps, that's because some women find it harder to stand their ground against a bully, lacking men's self-assuredness.

V.II. An important bullying behavior study:

A conceptual framework done by Einarsen & Skogstad (1996) within their studies which led to the results the main classes of variables to be included in both future research and future organizational action programs (see Figure 2). Four things are important in the model. First of all, this model distinguishes between the nature and causes of bullying behaviors as exhibited by the alleged offender from the nature and causes of the perceptions of the target of these behaviors. Furthermore, it distinguishes between the perceived exposure to bullying behaviors from the reactions to these kinds of behaviors. Third, it focuses on the impact of the organization on both the behavior of the alleged bullies and the perceptions and reactions of the targets. Fourth, the target's personality is likely to affect how the perpetrator's behaviors are perceived and even more so how they are reacted to. Last, but not least, the conceptual model pinpoints that the target's reactions to the bullying may alter the target's personal characteristics (such as personal styles of coping or even personality), as well as the very organization itself and how it reacts to the particular target.

Figure 3. A conceptual framework for the study and management of bullying at work



From Einarsen *et al.*, 2003

VI. General tips to face workplace bullying:

Bullying has become too common in the workplace, taking several forms of: nonverbal, verbal, psychological, and physical abuse. It can lead to health concerns, undue stress, and low productivity at work — and that's just the tip of the iceberg. That is why the question how to deal with bullies in work environment is the main concern to every worker suffered of this harmful behaviour. So, it's important to take appropriate steps to handle bullying at work to support the worker's wellbeing.

Below are some suggestions to consider if you find yourself bullied at work.

- Figure out the organisations stance around bullying to know what your options are; means the victim had to research his/her company's policies to determine the proper protocols to report such activity.
- Don't allow others to invade your boundaries; here are some suggests in the following phrases when dealing with a work bully or someone who is not treating you inappropriately with no limits or boundaries:

"Please don't talk to me that way."

"Let's try to get this conversation to a place where it can be productive."

"Let's take a break and come back to this later."

- Maintain a log with date, time and details of bullying incidents you're facing; this bit of advice on how to handle bullying in the workplace is extremely important to remember: as an employee, always document everything related to your interactions with the bully. This not only provides a timeline of events, but it also helps you recall information more easily when needed.
- Try to keep your skip level manager in the loop if possible; it means, if you are not at ease speaking to the individual who is bullying you directly, you might need to discuss it with your manager or human resources. Choose the course of action that feels best for you for your situation.
- If you feel uncomfortable in a particular situation, try to understand what's wrong; many individuals are afraid to speak up when they are being bullied. They might be concerned about what others will think. And, if the bully is their boss or someone in a position of power, then one's livelihood is threatened. A mental health professional or counsellor is a better way to start helping you in dealing with the stress of bullying and come up with solutions on how to handle it.
- The employee's wellbeing and mental health are most important, and without it he/she is no good to anyone. If he/she has done all he/she can to eliminate the bullying, but it's still occurring, then it might be time to explore other options and leave the organization. It might feel like the bully won if this is the avenue you choose, but when you take care of yourself and leave a bad situation, you're the winner.

Conclusion:

The aim of this article was to present an overview of what is meant by bullying at workplace as a phenomenon, and also as a negative behavior, trying to make a humble contribution to human and social field. Our main objective when first dealing with this paper on bullying in the workplace was to spot the light on how serious is this problem, attempting to make it clear to be understood in order to be able of acting effectively towards prevention. So victims must first provide descriptive information on the phenomenon itself, from the general point of view. Second, developing much information on the causes and consequences of the problem is needed from personal experiences gathered by both victims and professionals may be helpful in this phase. Although both social and psychosocial factors in the workplace seem to play a role in bullying at work, the causal links and the relative importance of these factors still require further research.

We assume that bullying better be seen as a complex social phenomenon characterized by multi-causality, involving a range of factors found at many explanatory levels, from individual to cultural and societal, depending on whether the focus on the actor's behavior or on the target's perceptions, reactions because in many cases people who experience bullying at their workplace might not talk about it openly. This could be because they have difficulty understanding what is happening to them, or don't want to reveal that they are being bullied. Understanding how a coworker or a colleague is being bullied at work can help in early intervention. Unfortunately, employers do not always take these claims seriously or fail to act appropriately to stop the harassment from taking place. If this has been your experience then you may be eligible to make a claim for compensation in order to seek damages for the pain and suffering you have experienced.

It is imperative for organizations to have a zero-tolerance policy on bullying at the workplace. This, along with awareness about the issue, will go a long way in creating the kind of work environment that is essential for employees' wellbeing.

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