

Bullying in the Workplace: Current Empirical  
Findings and Suggestions for Intervention  
and Future Research

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9  
10  
11



# Bullying in the Workplace: Current Empirical Findings and Suggestions for Intervention and Future Research

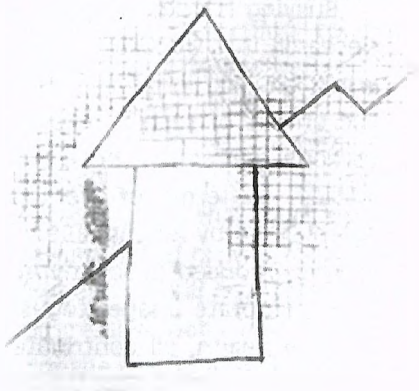
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## Περίληψη

Το άρθρο αποτελεί μια επιλεκτική ανασκόπηση της βιβλιογραφίας σε σχέση με τη θυματοποίηση στον εργασιακό χώρο. Περιληπτικά αναφέρονται τα συμπεράσματα σχετικά με τον ορισμό της θυματοποίησης, την έκταση του φαινομένου, τα χαρακτηριστικά των ανθρώπων που λειτουργούν ως "θύτες" και "θύματα", ποιες είναι οι αντιλήψεις των "θυτών" σε σχέση της πιθανές αιτίες αυτής της συμπεριφοράς. Επίσης, αναφέρονται τα βήματα που ακολουθήθηκαν σε άλλες χώρες για την αντιμετώπιση του φαινομένου και προτείνονται πιθανές εκδοχές παρεμβάσεων τόσο σε ατομικό επίπεδο αλλήλ και σε επίπεδο οργανισμού που μπορούν να εφαρμοστούν για τον περιορισμό του φαινομένου. Τέλος γίνεται αναφορά σε προτάσεις για την ερευνητική διερεύνηση του φαινομένου στον Ελληνικό χώρο.

## Abstract

The present paper is a selective review of the literature of workplace bullying. Main findings are summarised regarding issues of definition of bullying in the workplace, its incidence, characteristics of bullies and victims, perceived causes of workplace bullying. In addition, the steps undertaken by other countries to deal with the problem and possible pathways for interventions at both the individual and organisational level are presented from the literature. Finally some suggestions for research in the Greek environment are proposed.

## Introduction

Bullying is acknowledged as a serious problem in a variety of settings. Research has focused mainly on school-bullying and recently on the workplace and in penal institutions. Research in bullying has begun due to the effects of such a behaviour on the victims which include loss of self-esteem, depression, hopelessness and in some cases, attempts or actual suicide. In terms of workplace bullying the consequences have been summarised by Adams (1997) as 'high sickness rates and absenteeism, low morale, reduced productivity, rapid staff turnover, potential litigation, a poor corporate image, together with the harm to individual mental and physical health, all contribute to a high and unacceptable financial cost' (p.178) suggesting that the effects of workplace bullying can be identified in both the organisational and the individual level.

## Definition

There have been attempts at defining bullying and Olweus (1994) argues that someone is bullied when 'he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students' and he defines a negative action as 'when someone intentionally inflicts, or attempts to inflict, injury or discomfort upon another' (p.1173). Sharp and Brain (2000) define bullying as 'a systematic abuse of power' where the behaviour is repetitive and the victim cannot defend himself or herself. (p.1).

Farrington (1993) argues that bullying consists of the following key elements: 1) it is physical, verbal or psychological attack or intimidation, 2) the person who exercises that action is more powerful, or at least it is perceived as more powerful than the victim in a number of features, e.g. physical, 3) the act is intentional in causing fear, and/or harming the victim, 4) there is no provocation from the victim for the act to occur, it is repeated and produces the desired effect. Smith (1997: 249) states that bullying is "the systematic abuse of power- persistent and repeated actions which are intended to intimidate or hurt another person" and continues that it includes direct and indirect aggressive behaviour, discrimination and harassment. Pepler and Craig (1997) in the same line argue that bullying is the assertion of power through aggression and they continue putting bullying in a developmental perspective supporting that it changes with age and can be found as playground bullying, sexual harassment, gang attacks,

date violence, assault, marital violence, child abuse, workplace harassment and elder abuse, suggesting that workplace bullying is just a manifestation of a personality trait that takes different forms according to the developmental stage of the bully and the environment he/she belongs to every time.

Griffin and Gross (2004) argue that bullying is not a separate phenomenon from aggression and it is actually a subset of proactive aggressive behaviour, while Rayner and Hoel (1997) argue that there should be a distinction between aggression and bullying based on the frequency and the repetition of the behaviour to be regarded as bullying. They argue that one incidence can be regarded as aggressive behaviour, while a frequency of at least one incident per week for the last 6 months should be regarded as bullying behaviour.

A consensus about the definition of bullying- especially adult bullying- does not seem to have been reached, which is evident from the policy statement on harrassment of Stirling University where it is acknowledged that there is difficulty in defining bullying behaviour and "differences of attitude, culture or the misinterpretation of social signals can mean that what is perceived as harrassment by one person may not not seem so to another" The statement concludes that "the defining features, however, are that the behaviour is offensive or intimidating to the recipient and would be regarded as harassment by any reasonable person" This is in accord with Smith (1997) stating that there is a central role to the individual perceptions and thresholds for the experience of psychological distress, in the definition of bullying behaviour, while the guidance of academic research and legal reasons require a resolution of the matter.

## **Incidence**

Rayner (1997) in a survey of 1137 part-time students about workplace bullying, 53% reported that they have been bullied in their workplace while 77% reported that they have witnessed bullying in work. Einarsen and Skogstand (1996) from 14 different surveys in Norway assessing several issues about quality of life including seceral organisations and professions reported that 8.6% of the respondents have experienced bullying in their work. Leymann (1992) reported that 3.5 % of the Swedish working population have experienced bullying at work. Rayner and Hoel (1997) argue that on average around 4-5% of the workforce are being bullied at any one

time. From the studies assessing the incidence and the prevalence of workplace bullying it is clear that an agreement of the exact proportion of the employees being bullied has not been reached, which is not surprising given the fact that every study employs a different operational definition of workplace bullying and each researcher provides different conceptualisations of the issue, regarding which kind of behaviour constitutes bullying and for how long it should happen so as to be classified as bullying behaviour. It is needless to say that an agreement on what constitutes bullying at work will be very helpful to the assessment of its incidence and prevalence, and for meaningful comparisons to be made between professions, organisations and cultures.

### **Characteristics of Bullies in the Workplace**

Rayner (1997) reported that the bully is usually a line or a senior line manager (71%) with only 12 % of the times the bully is at the same level with the victim, while Einarsen and Skogstand (1996) reported that 54% of the victims have been bullied by a superior. Rayner and Hoel (1997) refer to the debate around personality traits and their relations with workplace bullying. They point to the fact that Machiavellianism could be related with bullying in the workplace. The results of several studies, however, have not revealed such a relation as it was found that people who scored high on Machiavellianism are not more punitive in comparison to low scores. Rayner (1999) in presenting and analysing the main findings of the UNISON study in Great Britain, a large scale incidence study conducted by one of the largests working unions of the country, reports that the bully is most of the times, 83%, the manager and only 15% of the times a co-worker, which makes it difficult to spot the bully. According to Rayner (1999), 'this presents a problem for targeting awareness-raising distinct from the linked areas of sexual and racial harassment where the harassers (and therefore targets of training) are more likely in the UK to be men and white respectively and thus, quite straightforward to target' (p.33).

### **Characteristics of Victims of Workplace Bullying**

Einarsen (1999) in a review of studies exploring the characteristics of victims report that victims of workplace bullying are described as overachievers with no realistic perception of their abilities and resources

and as rigid. In addition, they are prone to be more accurate, honest and punctual thereby being experienced by others as patronising and annoying and provoking aggression by the people working with them. Einarsen (1999) continues reporting certain personality differences between victims of workplace bullying and employees complaining about other matters than harassment. Victims of bullying were characterised as more sensitive, suspicious, angry, with low self-esteem, anxious in social settings, conscientious and literal-minded. It has to be noticed that it is unclear whether these characteristics comprise a personality prone to victimisation at work or these are the consequences of the workplace bullying inflicted on individuals (Einarsen, 1999).

### **Perceived Causes of Bullying in the Workplace**

Einarsen (1999) reports the results of several studies investigating the reasons for bullying behaviour as they are perceived by the victims of workplace bullying, arguing that a phenomenological approach is essential for the understanding of all kinds of aggressive behaviour. The subjective interpretation of bullying behaviour on the behalf of the victims is essential, as different individuals might have different thresholds for tolerating behaviour that is pressing and falls into the borders of a stressing situation and bullying behaviour. In addition, culture could be an important factor filtering the kinds of behaviour that are appropriate or not in the workplace and how several behavioural signs are interpreted by employees. Einarsen (1999) reports that victims of bullying usually blame the difficult personality of the bully combined with a change of job situation for the bully into a position of power, who is usually envious of the victims' qualifications. In addition, bullying could be the result of a struggle of power or competition over a job position, envy and uncertainty of the bully about him/herself. According to Einarsen (1999) envy was the mostly mentioned reason by the victims of bullying, however, victims also reported that 'their own lack of copying resources and self-efficacy, such as low self-esteem, shyness, and lack of conflict management skills contributed to the problem' (p. 20).

Zapf (1999) investigated the causes of bullying in the workplace in the organisational, work group related and personal level. He conducted a study of victims of bullying compared with employees that have not been subjected to workplace bullying, matched according to gender, age and education. The vast majority of the victims believed that they have been

142 subjected to bullying because the bully wanted to push them out of the company and that the bully, a hostile person influenced others. At the organisational level, the victims of workplace bullying believed that the organisational climate, high job stress and organisational problems contributed mostly in them being subjected to bullying in their workplace. The victims of bullying and the control group were further compared in terms of their working conditions. The victims of bullying differed significantly in comparison to the control group regarding several job characteristics. For the victims of bullying, there were higher stressors and less job control, less task and time-related control, uncertainty and organisational problems. The two groups, however, did not differ in job complexity. According to Zapf (1999) the latter finding reflects that bullying can occur at both lower and higher levels of the hierarchy of an organisation. In general, victims of bullying believed that organisational problems were a reason for their victimisation in comparison to the control group who reported less organisational problems. According to Zapf (1999: 77), 'These analyses support the victim's interpretation that the organisation is the reason why mobbing occurred...While bad conditions can result from the mobbing process, it seems unlikely that this holds for all cases' supporting the idea that when organisation conditions are improved, it is likely that improvements will also occur regarding bullying in the workplace.

Rayner (1999) also reports that people who have been bullied also report lack of constructive leadership, inability to monitor and control their own work and conflicting goals and priorities.

Zapf (1999) argued that some of the causes of bullying in the workplace could be found in the victims as well, and formulated the hypothesis that 'being unassertive, tending to avoid conflicts, or showing little effort to be a member of the group' (p.78), would increase the likelihood of victimisation. The results showed that employees high in unassertiveness/avoidance more often than the control group said that their performance was below average, were bullied because of their nationality and because of a bodily handicap, showed the worst conflict resolution skills, reported higher levels of anxiety, depression and negative affect. However, it is interesting to note that only 2 per cent of the victims of the study agreed that a possible cause of their being bullied was that their performance was below average, a finding that according to Zapf (1999) is interpreted as a reluctance on the behalf of the victims to accept that possible reasons for their being bullied could be found in themselves,



such as 'deficits in social skills, low performance, being difficult (such as being pedantic about accuracy), or being aggressive or moaning' (p. 78). This comment also should alert to the difficulties of relying simply on subjective, self-reported data from victims of bullying in the exploration of the causes of bullying behaviour. While such subjective accounts could be used as a starting point of investigation and study of bullying in the workplace, providing a phenomenological approach to the understanding of bullying behaviour, however, more objective methods should be employed for the identification of the possible causes of bullying in the workplace at both the individual and the organisational level and for meaningful interactions to emerge.

### **Steps and Interventions for Dealing with Bullying in the Workplace**

One of the possible effective strategies for dealing with workplace bullying according to Sheehan (1997) is legislative change, that is laws to be passed that inflict legal sanctions to perpetrators of bullying, although it could be argued that issues of workplace bullying could be dealt with under the sex discrimination legislation and health and safety legislation that are operating in the West World.

Sheehan, Barker and Rayner (1997) overviewed some of the approaches undertaken by certain countries to deal with the problem of bullying in the workplace. In Australia, the Beyond Bullying Association, a voluntary, not-for-profit organisation, was formed in 1993 to deal with the problem of bullying. The association has four main objectives: 'to increase public awareness of bullying and victimisation...to draw attention to the destructive use of power in modern institutions, and to promote relevant research to address the problem...to provide a mechanism of support and advice for victimised people...to influence community and government leaders to address the problem' (p.50-51). Sheehan et al (1997) report that the Association has been productive in achieving its goals as two international conferences have been organised, interviews and articles in local and national level have been given and a homepage has been created in the Internet, and a report has been published about the debate of workplace bullying in Australia. In addition, the Guide to Bullying at Work has been produced, providing guidelines for organisational self-regulation and development, producing preventive risk management strategies adopting a no blame approach.

Sheehan et al (1997) report that Trinity College at Dublin established a small unit dealing with bullying in the workplace, with the aims of conducting research and providing counselling services to victims of bullying in the workplace, while in Sweden the issue of bullying in the workplace is dealt by an Ordinance of the Swedish Work Environment Act, which prohibits any kind of victimisation at work.

Sheehan et al (1997) also report the steps undertaken in the U.K. starting with the Andrea Adams Trust, which provides advice and counselling to people bullied in their workplace together with publishing research in the area. The trust in collaboration with two unions managed to raise public awareness about bullying in the workplace and a lot of debate was created with the introduction of Dignity at Work Bill into the House of Lords, and many organisations introduced and operated 'dignity at work' and 'anti-harassment policies' for the protection of their employees.

Sheehan (1997) argued that bullying could be further prevented through the development of certain skills at the individual level and proposed that the use of emotional intelligence by managers could be a fruitful way of dealing and mainly preventing incidents of workplace bullying. Emotional intelligence is defined 'as the ability to use your awareness and sensitivity to discern the feelings underlying interpersonal communication, and to resist the temptation to respond impulsively and thoughtlessly, but instead to act from receptivity, authenticity and candor' (p.65). Generally, it is a way of developing self-restraint and compassion. Sheehan (1997) further argued that such skills as sensitivity to the needs of other people, observation and intervention in group processes and effective conflict resolution are required by managers especially when organisations are undergoing restructuring.

Luzio-Lockett (1995) argued that for any intervention to be successful, it should target at the individual level as well, and especially at the employees being victimised. She argued that assertiveness training should be a standard procedure for the victims of bullying not only after certain incidents of bullying have occurred, rather as a preventive measure in an organisation for such incidents to be avoided. Assertive behaviour involves 'standing up for your own rights in such a way that you do not violate another person's rights. Expressing your needs, wants, opinions, feelings and beliefs in direct, honest and appropriate ways' (Back and Back, 1991, p.1). Lamplugh, 1998 claims that 'asserting yourself means first working out what you want, then saying it clearly and negotiating with others. If you are

assertive, you retain your dignity and leave others the chance to retain theirs' (p.61). Luzio-Lockett (1995) argued that assertive behaviour means that regaining self-control and empowering oneself, and that the aim of assertive behaviour is not to directly change the other person's behaviour, rather to be in control of your own behaviour 'taking responsibility for it, which will, in turn, lead to a change in the pattern of the other person' relating to or interacting with you' (p.16).

Sheehan (1997) argued that in general the problem of bullying in the workplace should be put in the agendas of organisations and not being ignored or thought of as a process of socialisation in the group. Sheehan (1997) argued that the problem of bullying in the workplace should be better approached by confrontation of the bully from a problem-solving and not a punitive way, and giving the bully the opportunity to deal with his/her bullying behaviour by changing behaviour and developing certain interpersonal skills and finally 'advising that person of the likely economic and legal risks to the organisation should their behaviour continue may be one avenue to appeal to their better judgement.'(p.64). Sheehan (1997) finally proposed that once the bully is convinced to change his/her behavioural patterns, a strategy for addressing such problems would be the development of 'soft' people skills, such as empathy and trust.

In addition, Rayner (1999) argued that as one of the factors related with workplace bullying is, usually the inability of the victim to control and monitor his/her work, effective management skills could be introduced as part of an intervention towards reduction of bullying behaviour, targeting at monitoring and controlling the environment together with prioritisation of work activities. Rayner (1999) points that 'preventive measures may include clear, realistic induction and frequent formal sessions for updating from the macro to the micro to prevent priority drift as more and more tasks are highlighted for action....[in addition to] measures to monitor workplace climate, and measures to encourage the release of tension to relieve pressure before destructive levels are reached' (p.34-35), although such measures require a sophisticated level of management ability.

## Conclusion

It is clear that workplace bullying is a fact in every organisation with a heavy toll on both the individual and the organisational level. Incidence studies indicate that, the exact proportion of the employees being

subjected to such behaviour is variable mostly due to the different definitions of workplace bullying used in the studies. Most of the times the bully is a manager or in general someone with a higher position and more power than the victim and it is rare for workplace bullying to occur between co-workers. Research into the causes of bullying behaviour in the workplace has mainly focused on the subjective accounts of victims of workplace bullying, so in general a phenomenological approach has been employed, although several researchers argue that the causes of workplace bullying should be explored in both the individual and the organisational level. Thus, intervention should focus on the identification and 'education' of the bully in a no blame, problem solving way, the empowerment of the victim through assertiveness training and training of managerial skills and the organisational level where spotting at an early phase of such behaviour should take place and by provision of clear rules regarding the kinds of behaviour that employees should expect from managers together with a mechanism, within an organisation, that would deal with such incidents so as the employees would know where to look for solutions of such problems. Finally, research in Greece should be undertaken with the first aim of a descriptive analysis of workplace bullying in several organisations, the identification of the main parameters of the problem and the construction of theoretical propositions so as to attempt an explanation of the problem.

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