

Career Counselling Individuals Experiencing Workplace Bullying

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Abstract

Workplace bullying is a pervasive career issue that impacts not only the victim's vocational well-being, but also the perpetrator, witnesses, and organization. Since many victims of workplace bullying leave their jobs, counsellors should be aware of these issues in order to effectively support clients through their transitional difficulties. This article provides a conceptual overview of workplace bullying by exploring the causes and effects of bullying on victims, perpetrators, and the organization. Implications for counselling the victims of workplace bullying are discussed using insights from social cognitive career theory and work adjustment theory.

Keywords: career development, career theories, counselling interventions, workplace bullying

Workplace bullying is a serious issue that is gaining more attention both in organizations and among researchers. This is a wide-spread concern from manufacturing to retail to higher education to healthcare, however, most workplace bullying is left

unreported, undocumented, or dismissed (Kohut, 2008). Globally, Nielsen and Einarsen (2018) estimated the prevalence rate of workplace bullying to be around 15%, further nuanced by differences in demographic characteristics, geographical locations, and measurement or methodological factors. According to a systematic literature review of 14 samples, the prevalence of workplace bullying typically fluctuates between 7.6% to 19.4% in North America, with the exception of very high prevalence in the healthcare sector (León-Pérez et al., 2021). The Canadian Safety Council reports that 75% of victims of workplace bullying end up leaving their jobs, and this issue is four times more common than sexual harassment or workplace discrimination. It is evident that this is a problem increasing in frequency and concern with implications for the physical, psychological, and mental health of victimized individuals and witnesses of bullying, as well as costs to organizations.

Definition of Workplace Bullying

According to the Canadian Center for Occupational Health and Safety (2005), bullying is

defined harmful physical or verbal acts in the workplace, often occurring repeatedly to intimidate, offend, degrade, or humiliate an individual or group. In the literature, there are many variations in the definition of what constitutes workplace bullying, but they all essentially encompass the same elements in one form or another – repetition, duration, escalation, power disparity, and attributed intent (Einarsen et al., 2003; Rayner & Keashly, 2005; Rayner et al., 2002; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007).

Bullying can be verbal and non-verbal, direct or indirect. Bartlett and Bartlett (2011) explained that bullying acts could be classified into three themes – work-related, psychological/personal, and physical/threatening. Work-related acts of bullying revolve around workload and work process (e.g., withholding information or resources, overruling decisions, flaunting status or power); psychological/personal bullying includes acts of gossiping, isolation, accusation, belittlement, humiliation; physical/threatening refers primarily to acts of violence and threats.

When determining if someone's behaviour is considered bullying, it is important to keep in mind the factor of culture. Cultural

variation in forms of interaction can cause confusion in interpreting whether a behaviour is considered to be abusive (Escartin et al., 2011). Thus, it is important to clarify the definition of workplace bullying in different cultural contexts for theoretical and practical implications (Escartin et al., 2011).

This paper will provide a conceptual overview of workplace bullying – what the causes and effects on the bullies/perpetrators are, the causes and effects on the bullied/victims and the witnesses of bullying, and the role of organizations. The issue of workplace bullying will then be explored through two career theories: social cognitive career theory (SCCT) (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994) and Dawis and Lloyd Lofquist's (1984) work adjustment theory. The final part of this paper will look at what can be done to address workplace bullying and the implications for counselling for the target population who are coping with this mid-career crisis and transitional difficulties – the victims of workplace bullying.

The purpose of this paper is to offer career counsellors two approaches on how to identify clients who are current or past victims of workplace bullying. Recognizing that some individuals may be hesitant to disclose their experiences, our focus is on approaching the topic with utmost sensitivity. We aim to discuss the detrimental personal effects of bullying, including depression and anxiety, diminished job

satisfaction, disturbed sleep, and, most importantly, guide and support clients as they are finding ways to cope with the harmful work environment.

Profile of the Bully/Perpetrator

Why does bullying occur?

The question of why people bully can be explored through various avenues such as personality, work pressures, mental health issues, and social learning. Matthiesen and Einarsen (2007) found that “systematic exposure to negative social experiences in childhood, such as bullying, may cause serious negative aftereffects in adult life (i.e. a vulnerable personality). Thus, empirical findings indicate that persons who were victimized at school are more likely to be victimized in the workplace” (p. 747). Kohut (2008) listed some general characteristics of bullies, which include difficulties in interpersonal relationships, lack of empathy, difficulties maintaining boundaries, holding rigid and irrational belief patterns, hidden agendas, lack of emotional intelligence, self-reflection, and perspective taking. In addition, Djurkovic, McCormack, and Casimir (2004) stated that a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for bullying to occur is the element of power differential either in the form of positional or personal (i.e. being friends with one's super-ordinate) power.

Many bullies may be jealous or feel threatened by

others' competency, qualifications, intelligence, and success in the workplace. They are often skilled in one main skill, have rigid work patterns, and struggle to adapt to coworkers deviating from their patterns (Kohut, 2008). In a study on bullying at work, perpetrators were found to be more aggressive than those who do not report any involvement with bullying (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2007).

Effects on the Bully

Most of the existing research on the topic of workplace bullying tends to be on the causes and effects on the victims, but little has been done to explore the effects that bullying has on the perpetrators. This type of research can be quite valuable because if people become aware that both the bully and the bullied suffer negative consequences from workplace bullying, perhaps this could be a valuable tool to combat this issue. Jenkins, Winefield, and Sarris (2011) conducted an exploratory study to look at the consequences of being accused of workplace bullying. Participants reported physical and psychological concerns associated with being accused of bullying or harassment, regardless of whether they were found guilty or not. The accused experienced anxiety, depression, stress, trouble sleeping, and felt suicidal, devastated, and mortified. In addition, both those found guilty and not guilty of the bullying allegations had strong perceptions of unfairness because they felt the

organization failed to abide by the policies outlining how allegations were to be investigated. These concerns and feelings were further confirmed by more recent studies (Vranjes et al., 2022; Wicks et al., 2021). Negative consequences of being accused led to forced resignations, wrongful dismissals, or voluntary leaves due to a lack of trust and support from the organization to return to their role regardless of being found guilty or not.

Profile of the Targets of Bullying

Workplace Bullying Behaviours

The victims of workplace bullying are often subjected to a variety of negative behaviours. Djurkovic et al. (2004) outlined a five-category taxonomy of workplace bullying behaviours, which appears to be quite representative of the existing workplace bullying literature: 1) threat to professional status (e.g. humiliation, the accusation of lack of effort); 2) threat to personal standing (e.g. name-calling, insults, teasing, and intimidation); 3) isolation (e.g. preventing access to/withholding resources and opportunities, social isolation); 4) overwork (e.g. undue pressures, impossible deadlines, constant unnecessary disruptions; and 5) de-stabilization (e.g. failure to give credit where it is due, assigning meaningless tasks, removing responsibility, and setups for failure).

Who Gets Bullied

The issue of workplace bullying is unique from workplace harassment or violence in that acts are typically subtle and trivial, and targets may not even realize they are being bullied. Victims of workplace bullying are typically high-achieving, dedicated workers (Futterman, 2004). Their eagerness often makes them easy targets of workplace bullying.

Furthermore, according to the International Labour Organization, those who have raised concerns about inappropriate, unethical, or bullying behaviours are often stigmatized as “having a negative attitude, being paranoid or engaging in whistle-blowing” (Futterman, 2004, p. 14). Systematic reviews of cross-sectional and prospective studies also indicated that a range of work stressors, such as role conflict and ambiguity, workload, job insecurity, and cognitive demands have shown to heighten the risk of being the target of bullying (Reknes et al., 2014; Van den Brande et al., 2016).

A study conducted by Brousse et al. (2008) examined the psychopathological features of a patient population of targets of workplace bullying. They found that neuroticism often distinguished targets of workplace bullying, which was characterized by excessive emotional sensitivity, inclination to protest, and inability to cope with stressful events. Thus, there are strong associations with work disability for those

identified with neuroticism when faced with interpersonal conflicts, bullying tactics, and psychological decomposition as work-related conflicts accumulate (Nielsen et al., 2017; Podsiadly & Gamian-Wilk, 2017).

Effects of Bullying

Individuals who are bullied often experience a range of physical, emotional, mental, and psychological issues such as sadness, depression, loss of confidence and esteem, self-blame, job dissatisfaction, reduced productivity at work (which can intensify bullying), sleep difficulties and strain on interpersonal relationships (Glambek et al., 2014; Hansen et al., 2014; Hoobler et al., 2010; Verkuil et al., 2015). These effects are similar to those on the perpetrators. Some victims of bullying may even develop symptoms consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder such as avoidance, intrusion, and hyperarousal (Nielsen et al., 2015). Interestingly, colleagues who merely witness bullying may also feel threatened and experience symptoms of general stress (Djurkovic et al., 2004).

In order to address these issues, there are several options for the targeted individual to consider: ignore the behaviour and/or the perpetrator, report (present documented incidents), decide to stay or leave the organization, and what Kohut (2008) called the N.I.C.E four-point plan (N = neutralize emotions to remain

rational; I = identify bully's type; C = control encounters; E = explore options to end conflicts without escalating the conflict). If a client decides the best option for them is to stay at the organization, career counsellors can focus on helping clients cope with the personal and professional consequences of workplace bullying. If a client decides to leave, they are likely to experience anxiety in the job search process, loss of their self-identity if one's career was a defining part of their being and identity, or financial difficulties. Thus, counsellors can support clients to determine if they should look for another position in a less hostile working environment or consider changing to a whole new career.

Organizational Contributions and Interventions

The literature on workplace bullying often includes the role organizations have in this issue. For example, some work cultures normalize workplace bullying through tacit encouragement or failing to intervene certain problems (Cleary et al., 2009). Matthiesen and Einarsen (2007) proposed that psychosocial factors in the work environment should be taken into consideration when attempting to determine why bullying occurs. For example, bullying can be a consequence of micropolitical behaviour, rivalry, competition, and compression of career structures. In turn, interpersonal conflicts can arise and some may resort to bullying as

a competitive tactic.

When bullying occurs in the workplace, not only do individuals suffer, but the organization suffers too. If employees are suffering from emotional and psychological harm, their work performance may likely diminish (Nauman et al., 2023). For organizations, this can lead to economic costs in the form of reduced productivity, absenteeism, high turnover rates, lowered morale, wrongful dismissal lawsuits, and damaged customer relations (Bartlett & Bartlett, 2011; Giga et al., 2008; Magee et al., 2017; Nielsen et al., 2016). Additionally, psychological injury claims cost significantly more and require longer recovery time than physical injury claims (Jenkins et al., 2011). Thus, the health of both the victim and perpetrator is important from an organization's economic perspective.

Commonly proposed solutions for organizations to deal with workplace bullying are to make improvements in the areas of education, prevention, assessment, monitoring, corrective actions, and corporate responsibility (Vickers, 2006). The implementation of more structured approaches such as zero-tolerance policies, bully-free environments, and a culture of respect is necessary to promote the right that each person has to a fair and equitable workplace where one is treated with respect and dignity (Cleary et al., 2009; Khan & Khan, 2012; McKay et al., 2010; Özer & Escartín, 2023).

Theoretical Conceptualizations

Social Cognitive Career Theory

Social cognitive career theory (SCCT) highlights the triadic reciprocal interaction between the individual, the environment, and behavioral variables that form career and academic interests, and the translation of these interests into goals, actions, and attainments (Chronister & McWhirter, 2003; Sharf, 2010). The model assumes each person is an active agent in their environment. The social component of SCCT examines how human thoughts and behaviours are influenced by one's social environment. The idea that personal attributes and cognitive processing influence perceptions and behaviours in one's environment reflect the cognitive aspect.

Applying the concepts of SCCT to the issue of workplace bullying, Claybourn (2011) explained that employees exposed to harassment will report many negative thoughts and feelings (as outlined in the 'Effects of Bullying' section), but the low levels of organizational commitment factor have high potential to perpetuate this issue as it leads to limited concern about the well-being and courteous treatment of fellow colleagues. Furthermore, findings have shown a relation between employee satisfaction, work characteristics, and employee behaviour are interrelated.

For example, researchers have found a statistically significant negative correlation between job satisfaction and organizational aggression (Claybourn, 2011). This applies also to employees who witness bullying and to both victims and witnesses who hold negative perceptions of the organization, which in turn leads to lower job satisfaction and higher levels of negative behavioural intentions and workplace behaviours (Claybourn, 2011). Given the fact that the individual, the environment, and behaviours are all interconnected, it is no surprise that if one is exposed to a negative environment and bullying behaviours, the individual may experience negative thoughts and feelings, and react based on the negativity.

Work Adjustment Theory

Sharf (2010) outlined Dawis and Logquist's theory of work adjustment as an ongoing, dynamic process of achieving and maintaining correspondence with a work environment. The two characteristics of this theory are satisfaction and satisfactoriness, which refer to a worker's satisfaction with one's work, and employers' satisfaction with employees' performance, respectively. This theory is applicable to those who are experiencing work adjustment problems, and those who are victims, witnesses, or perpetrators of workplace bullying are likely to encounter such issues.

If a workplace has a culture of bullying, it is evident that the work environment is failing to satisfy employees' needs, and in turn, individual employees are likely to demonstrate lower morale and productivity, and higher levels of tardiness, absenteeism, and turnover (Sansone & Sansone, 2015). Thus, workplace adjustment theory is applicable to the issue of workplace bullying as it can help clients with adjusting to work problems, including conflict with coworkers and superiors (Sharf, 2010).

Workplace Bullying and Career Counselling Implications

Given that workplace bullying is gaining more attention as a pervasive and serious career crisis involving implications for one's vocational well-being, training counsellors to identify these situations is paramount because many clients often do not even recognize that they are targets of bullying due to the subtle nature of bullying behaviours. A lack of awareness on the part of the counsellor can lead them to inadvertently hold targets responsible for the maltreatment or to misdiagnose their symptoms of depression and anxiety, for instance, as the result of a mental illness. Inaccurate diagnoses have great potential to intensify the targets' suffering. Thus, it is vital that counsellors gain a complete understanding of a client's work context in order to determine whether presenting symptoms are consistent with

workplace bullying or a mental health issue, so appropriate coping strategies or treatments can be devised and implemented (Lewis et al., 2002).

Another consequence of workplace bullying is the detriment of relationships with significant others, another reason why a counsellor's understanding and support are so crucial. Lewis, et al. (2002) reported that the experience of workplace bullying is so incomprehensible to significant others that in the midst of trying to provide support, the potential exists that they may question whether the victim somehow invited such treatment. Some may even become frustrated with the victim's lack of action and withdrawn behaviours, thereby increasing the feeling of isolation and creating more stress.

SCCT Counseling Implications

As clients contemplate their options in response to workplace bullying, a social-cognitive career counselor can encourage them to exercise their career self-efficacy to successfully accomplish their life career developmental tasks (Coogan & Chen, 2007). One's perceived level of self-efficacy is often negatively affected as a result of workplace bullying due to repeated messages challenging one's competency and performance. Sharf (2010) proposed that SCCT counselors help clients increase their self-efficacy and belief in positive outcome expectations

through the identification of one's assets, previous experiences and accomplishments, and career-related skills. This can also be accomplished by dividing tasks into smaller, more manageable parts to increase the client's chances of success, and opportunities to receive positive reinforcement. The counsellor can support and encourage the client to expand one's skills repertoire and develop tasks to further increase a sense of self-efficacy. Throughout this process, background contextual factors such as culture, gender, and contextual/environmental influences proximal to choice behaviour need to be taken into consideration during the exploration of career options.

Work Adjustment Theory Counselling Implications

At a time of indecision and confusion about one's career future, a counsellor working with the work adjustment theory first needs to assess a client's abilities, values, personality, and interests. Then the counsellor and client can collaboratively explore the requirements and conditions needed for the client's occupations/careers of interest. The final step would be to narrow the career choices down to a manageable number based on the degree of fit between the individual and the environment before making a final decision to stay or leave one's current position (Sharf, 2010).

Applying this to working with clients victimized by workplace bullying, an assessment of the client's personality and their working environment can be made (Sharf, 2010). The counselor can either help the client make adjustments to one's current abilities to better cope with the bullying, such as assertiveness training and coping strategies. However, the reduced confidence and self-esteem resulting from bullying can hinder the client from benefiting from these adjustments. Changing the environment by changing jobs or transferring departments in order to improve the individual's satisfaction with work is one option. Alternatively, if a discrepancy exists between an individual's values and abilities and the workplace's reinforcer persists, possible solutions are to adjust one's expectations of the reinforcers (i.e., stop trying to please the bully) or to seek reinforcement outside the workplace.

Conclusion

Workplace bullying is a serious issue that is gaining more attention as there is increasing awareness of the negative implications for all involved – the bully, the bullied, witnesses, and the organization. The bullied's perspective can be understood from the social cognitive career theory and work adjustment theory. The potential flaws in the triadic reciprocal interactions or the components of satisfaction and satisfactoriness affecting

one's vocational well-being are important areas to consider both in understanding a client's situation, and in the process of deriving solutions so clients are assisted for workplace bullying and not misdiagnosed. Therefore, career counsellors should be especially sensitively attuned to the possibility of workplace bullying and be adequately equipped to deal with such issues in a professional and skillful manner. At the same time, counsellors must acknowledge the wide array of negative consequences of bullying (e.g., physical consequences including headaches and sleep disturbances, psychological consequences like depression and anxiety, and work-related consequences like low job satisfaction) that shape how clients proceed with their lives.

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