

Chapter 41

Workplace Bullying in Digital Environments: Antecedents, Consequences, Prevention, and Future Directions

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ABSTRACT

Workplace bullying continues to be a prevalent workplace conflict issue in organizations around the world. The organizational reliance of communication technologies and digital media have enabled workplace bullying to evolve into workplace cyberbullying. Workplace bullying impacts individuals, relationships, organizations, and societies. For this reason, this chapter reviewed the transdisciplinary workplace bullying literature to conceptualize key constructs such as workplace bullying and workplace cyberbullying. This chapter also reviews the prevalence of workplace bullying, antecedent behaviors of workplace bullying, the consequences of workplace bullying, and the intervention approaches. Lastly, this chapter offers several recommendations for the future trends of workplace bullying scholarship.

INTRODUCTION

Being harassed by a peer or a supervisor in the workplace can harm employees and an organization's working environment when not managed effectively. Being called malicious names at work such as, "You're an idiot, you can't do anything right" or "You're stupid, why don't you just quit your job, we don't need you" can make long-lasting emotional scars in individual employees. Other indirect forms of aggression can include being excluded from a team and being ignored from participating in meaningful work tasks. Because of the latest technological advances within organizations, workplace bullying has evolved into workplace cyberbullying. Aggressors, or bullies, may use mobile devices to harass other workers within and outside of working hours through email, text messaging, instant messaging, or through apps. Victims may also receive threatening and harmful messages from their colleagues and supervisors through email systems and social networking sites.

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The Workplace Bullying Institute (2014) conducted a national survey which revealed that 27% of American workers have experienced abusive conduct in the workplace (Namie, Christensen, & Phillips, 2014). Most of the reported workplace bullying behaviors were enacted by organizational leaders such as supervisors and managers. Interestingly, even though 72% of Americans were conscious of workplace bullying behavior at work, they reported not reporting the behavior and not addressing the problem adequately (Namie, Christensen, & Phillips, 2014). Approximately 27% of employees reported directly witnessing workplace bullying behaviors without taking action (Namie, Christensen, & Phillips, 2014).

Researchers and practitioners have conducted a plethora of research studies to investigate this phenomenon by examining it from the psychological, communication, organizational, and sociological perspectives. Despite the high prevalence of behavioral misconduct at work, managers and employees continue to struggle with this issue with little to no preparation. Some of these common struggles include identifying and reporting workplace bullying behavior, managing workplace bullying as a manager, and developing a civilized organizational culture.

In order to prevent workplace bullying, Yamada (2002) originated the Healthy Workplace Bill (HWB) to prevent abuse in the workplace; however, criticisms have been reported about the bill. First, the bill does not require employers to take responsibility for workplace bullying behavior (Namie, Namie, & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2011). Although many employers were aware of the bill, several employers did not implement the suggested recommendations to create a safe working environment. Second, the bill is not linked to any judicial action by the courts and it did not protect all victims of workplace abuse. Without the support from lawmakers and federal legislation, making amends due to the injustices of workplace abuse became more difficult to achieve (Namie, Namie, & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2011). According to the Workplace Bullying Institute (2014), thus far, there is no federal law protecting the labor rights of abused American workers, despite the consistent reports of physical and psychological injuries due to workplace misconducts.

Given the continued high prevalence of victimization in the workplace and the lack of understanding of workplace bullying, this chapter will address the following six themes: 1) the conceptualization of workplace bullying, 2) the prevalence, 3) the antecedent behaviors, 4) the consequences, 5) the prevention approaches, and 6) the future directions of workplace bullying scholarship.

BACKGROUND

Conceptualizing Workplace Bullying, Workplace Harassment, and Cyberbullying

Workplace bullying has been previously defined as the “repeated behavior that offends, humiliates, sabotages, intimidates, or negatively affects someone’s work when there is an imbalance of power” (Barron, 2003, & Zapf & Einarsen, 2001, p. 5). It also includes “harassing, offending, or socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone’s work” (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011, p.22). Nielsen, Matthiesen, and Einarsen (2010) also extended Olweus’ (1991) definition of bullying that was tailored to children to the definition of workplace bullying based on the following four elements: target exposure, repeated negative behaviors, duration of mistreatment, and an imbalance of power. First, a target receives a direct or indirect negative message (e.g., threat) that is both unwanted and emotionally disturbing. Second, the aggressive behavior is not a singular event, but rather repeated over time toward

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