In the Eye of the Beholder: A Review of Qualitative Studies on Workplace Bullying

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Abstract

Workplace bullying is not a new phenomenon and has been studied by researchers for more than 25 years. Known for its ill effects on individuals and organizations, workplace bullying is considered to be a complex phenomenon which is subjective in nature, which may mean different to different individuals. However, the extant literature shows that the study on the phenomenon has been dominated by objectivist approach and plethora of studies using quantitative techniques can be found. Despite the popularity of positivist paradigm to study the said phenomenon, with increasing interest the need for an interpretive or post-modern approach was felt, hence the resultant rise in the number of qualitative studies during the recent past. This methodological shift calls for a review of literature to unravel the findings of qualitative studies done on workplace bullying which might have discovered new dimensions to the phenomenon which quantitative studies may have failed to unveil.

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1. Introduction

Workplace bullying (WPB) is prolonged hostile behaviour of an individual or group of individuals towards another individual which may have detrimental effects on her physical and/or psychological health. It is prevalent across countries [1] and not only effect the individual and organization, but society at large [2]. Although research on WPB is dominated by objectivist approach, its subjectivity has been acknowledged by researchers [3],[4]. Hence, an increasing number of anti-positivist studies are being undertaken to explore new dimensions of the phenomenon. Various researchers have used different qualitative method to explore its intricacies and have discovered different themes that throw light on the latent aspects of bullying in workplace.

This paper aims to review the contributions of the subjective studies as they bring in new insights to the otherwise well researched subjective phenomenon of WPB from an objective eye [5]. The new themes uncovered in these studies can help researchers, professionals and corporates to appreciate the vast and vicious effects of WPB on its targets and organizations and help them relate to the emotional trauma they undergo [5], [6], [7].

2. Search Method

In order to acquire the extant of qualitative studies on workplace bullying, research platforms like Ebsco, Proquest, Pubmed, Social Science Research Network (SSRN), Directory of Open Access Journals and Google Scholar were searched using WPB, Mobbing and qualitative studies as key words. Full text papers in English from peer reviewed journals were included in the study to keep the review feasible. The papers were selected by going through their abstracts that clearly mentioned the use of qualitative or mixed methods of data collection and/or analysis. Every paper was then read through to explore the themes that evolved in those studies. The selected papers were reached the research strategy depicted in Figure 1
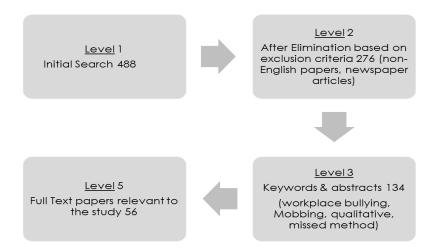

Figure 1: Search Strategy

3. Findings

This paper is divided into six sections, each representing the review of different elements of WPB. Section one addresses the definitional issues of the phenomenon under question, followed by a review of various forms of bullying. Section three and section four review the antecedents of bullying and its consequences respectively. The last two sections talk about dealing with bullying, of which one pertains to the targets, while the other pertains to non-targets.

3.1 Definitional Complexity

The seminal work on the study of workplace bullying can be tracked back to Heinz Leymann work in 1990 [8], since then it has been researched extensively worldwide. Although it is considered as a universal phenomenon, not confined to single country or sector [9], it lacks universal definition [10], [11], which could be due to is its subjective and complex nature [12].

The first operational definition on WPB or rather mobbing was developed based on 800 individual case studies from Sweden working population. Leymann [13] preferred the word mobbing to describe the

phenomenon which he describes to be persistent systematic hostile and unethical communication within organizations.

Other definitions are either based on the findings of quantitative empirical studies [14], [15], [16] (Zapf, 1999; Einarsen, 1999; Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Hjelt-Black, 1994) or on previous researches on school bullying[17], [18], [19].

Although, different operational definitions are available on this social process at workplace the most commonly used definition is:

> "Bullying at work means harassing, offending, socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone's work tasks. In order for the label bullying (or mobbing) to be applied to a particular activity, interaction or process it has to occur repeatedly and regularly (e.g., weekly) and over a period of time (e.g., 6 months). Bullying is an escalating process in the course of which the person confronted ends up in an inferior position and becomes the target of systematic negative social acts. A conflict cannot be called bullying if the incident is an isolated event or if two parties of approximately equal ''strength'' are in conflict." [20]

Considering the confusion on the definitions, researchers [21], [11]have identified certain characteristics that can put bullying incidents in perspective:

- Negative Treatment
- Frequency of negative treatment
- Persistent of negative treatment
- Power imbalance

Despite availability of definitions and further its characteristics, certain qualitative studies have investigated the inclusivity of these definitions.

Current definitions' single directional (target) perspective fails to help HR officials to solve bullying issues at workplace. For them the element of intentionality, witness records and own gut feeling are important to conclude a case on bullying [22] which are not included in the available definitions. On the other hand Carbo& Hughes [12], based on targets' perspective, suggest that the inclusion of intent shall make it difficult for them to voice their concerns. They also advise the inclusion of non-hierarchical power imbalance to define bullying as the abuse of power may not always be structural in nature. Also, certain targets consider 'single events' as bullying which deviates from the common definitions. These finding led them to develop a new definition of WPB from Human Rights perspective (see [12]).

Saunders, et al., [23] found that lay individuals do not consider persistency, frequency, power imbalance and self-label as important criteria for WPB. Rather they emphasise on the breach of psychological contract to relate to their experiences of bullying. Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik and Alberts[24] brought forward the metaphorical sense making of the targets of bullying. Although bullying is hard to define, this study has openned the grounds to explain the turmoil of the targets from their own eyes helping the concerned professionals empathise with them.

WPB definitions have been highly entrenched by the so called experts which fail to open themselves towards the glitches in their understanding of the phenomenon. Liefooghe and Davey [25] throw light on two different discourses, one where the powerful (academicians, trade unions, policy makers have) institutionalized WPB and the victims who not only face interpersonal bullying but are highly disappointed with the organizational bullying through polices (like bell curve) which isn't recognized in the definitions.

3.2 Antecedents

The antecedents of workplace bullying is a result of interaction between situational influences and the individual being targeted [26]. The situational influencers that promote workplace bullying need to be motivated and precipitated in the right condition to further enable bullying behaviour [27]. According to Hoel and Cooper [28], factors at different levels may contribute to bullying behaviour. These factors may be

individual level, dyadic, group level, organizational level or societal level. In order to explore further the antecedents various qualitative studies have taken place and the review of some are presented here.

Conditions likes understaffing and acute workload [29], [30]provoke unfair practices within nursing. In addition, new employees seem to be easy targets for the bullies. Informal alliances within organization may give rise to planned bullying where the clique member protect each other in their evil endeavours. Hutchinson, Vickers, Jackson and Wilkes [31]have termed it as 'predatory alliances'.

Moreover, avoidance of managers towards employees complains may increase horizontal bullying [32]. Job, team, and organizational factors are commonly seen influencers in different studies on workplace bullying [33], [34].

For top officials bullying is considered as tough management style, which is misunderstood by employees [35]. Hence, organizations may be accepting it as a norm [36]. Also, organizational change [37] and individuals own inability to adapt to it [34], may stimulate bullying as it generates uncertainty and insecurity among employees resulting in aggressive [37] or submissive behaviour [38].

Bullying may not always be individualised but may arise from the organizational polices and systems as a need for survival in the industry [39], [40], [41], where organizational power and politics play a key role [41]. D'Cruz and Noronha [39] termed it as depersonalised bullying where employees feel intimidated by the rules and regulations that command their work life. Bullying may also originate due to organizational corruption [42] and value conflicts which escalate to power struggle, where both strong and weak employees become targets [43]. In a study of athletic trainers Weuve, et al., [44] found that perception towards a profession may cause bullying in certain work settings due to unsupportive administration.

External and contemporary factors like economic and political scenarios may also create uncertainty in organizational environment. Such situations are not in control and may generate negativity and tension within organizations, giving rise to hostility [22]. Baillien, et al., [45] concluded that bullying may occur due to incapability of coping, escalated conflicts and culture of team and/or organizations, further, communicational characteristics of organizations also add to bullying scenarios [46]. Ilongo [47], suggests that bullying may be caused by individual perception of 'I versus others' which develops a feeling of separation and distrust. Hence an individual's own inhibitions, in light of workplace conditions and self-perpetuations, result in developing a victim or a perpetrator.

Hodson, Roscigno and Lopez [48] developed a model which projected that job insecurity and incoherence within organizations result in abuse of power and organizational chaos which lead to pervasive bullying in work settings. Hodsen et al's[48] model was later adopted by De Wet [49] to explain educators' understanding of the social phenomenon under question, his conclusions reinforced Hodson et al's[48] findings. De Wet [46], [49] found that leadership and organizational culture promoted workplace bullying in organziations that lack ethical grounding within the top management. Cultural differences may lead to discrmination, which may futher lead to bullying. However, discrimination can go beyond cultural boundaries. Hence, apart from discrimination due to race, ethnicity or gender [50], one may become target due to certain physical (or mental) disability [51], or sheer favouritism [52].

3.3Forms of Bullying

The forms of bullying are often characterized by in three categories namely overt, covert and work-related [10]. However, different qualitative studies have provided their own typology of the forms. These studies undertaken to explore the dynamics on forms of workplace bullying are reviewed in this section.

Hutchinson, et al. [53] developed a typology of bullying behaviour experienced by nurses. These were bifurcated into three groups – personal attacks, professional attacks and work and tasks related bullying. Similar findings were presented in an initial qualitative study done by Dilek and Aytolan[54] and Waschgler, et al.[55]. In both the studies, authors went on to develop instruments that captured forms of bullying. The former developed a psychometric evaluation instrument for psychologically violent behaviour and the later developed a scale – Hospital Aggressive Behaviour Scale-version Co-workers-Superiors (HABS-CS) that captured forms of bullying from both co-workers and supervisors.

Simon and Mawn [30] found that unrealistic workload was a major issue reported by the participants. The authors came up with the term 'structural bullying' that described unfair disciplinary measures taken by the supervisors. The newly registered nurses described forms of bullying that seemed like 'nurses eating their young' during their seminal years of work. Cult like groups bully the new nurses by hiding information, interrupting work and writing their own rules regarding work roles, tasks and status [56]. Inadequate

residency, lack of support, criticism, devaluing, public humiliation, negative facial expression, interrupting tasks by different means and verbal rejection are commonly faced by the nurses [29].

Pietersen [52], studied the concept of workplace bullying in an academic setting. He found that obstruction of work, denial of due recognition and isolating, were the common forms of bullying faced by the targets. Also, non-consent on political decisions which effect the work environment, devaluing and discrimination occur frequently [47]. As dicussed earlier, De Wet [49], tried to understand bullying in light of Hodson et al's [48] model which suggests that non-cohesion in organizational settings and relational powerlessness leads to bullying. He found school administrations lack transparency and accountability as the leadership is unprincipled and incompetent which gives rise to relational powerless and that employees get exposed to public and private humiliation and disrespect by principals in accomplice with other employees.

D'Cruz and Noronha [39] (2009), in their study on Indian call centre employees, highlight the existence of depersonalised bullying which were related of the requirements of organization's own aspirations. Research on bullying at workplace has mainly focused on individualised characteristics of workplace bullying [25]. However, that may not always be the case. Liefooghe and Davey [41] explain that forms of bullying may include policy decisions and statistical threats which require the employees to obey certain rules that disturb their work performance leading to frustration. Disregarding the voice of employee during pay negotiation and unfair appraisal system (against the whistle blowers) [57] are also seen. The employees who face bullying often get the feeling of being robbed of their due credits and rights leaving them helpless [4], [34]. In some cases not returning borrowed money was also found to be a form of bullying [34]

3.4 Consequences

Consequences, is a highly researched domain of WPB. Although, not many different themes were found within the qualitative studies that did not resonate of previous studies, certain noted qualitative studies are discussed here.

Bullying affects both psychological and physical wellbeing of an individual. Targets remain in a chronic emotional stress and their experiences leave a scar that forces them to question the value and belief system they grew up with [58]. Targets have found to experience emotional inadequacy, lack of trust [44], stress, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder [59], [60], [61] and panic attacks [60] due to their prolonged exposure to workplace bullying.Lovell and Lee [61] in their study found that participants consider bullying far more severe than sexual advances. The biological reactions to such longitudinal negative experience include sweating, blurred vision, breathing difficulty and sleep disorders among others [59]. These conditions further have negative impact on the individuals' performance at work[46] ,[53], [60], as their self-confidence and motivation is hampered [62].

Bullying targets are commonly known to leave the organization as their final resort [29], [30] [53], [63], [64].This is not just a coping strategy but a serious negative consequence as it increases employee turnover [32]. The feeling of fear, hopelessness, powerlessness and the feeling of being unemployable are iterated by the targets [29].

Ilongo, 65] explains that workplace bullying results into 'anti-positive psychology' as it negatively affects the individual's ability to use his strengths to cope with a situation. This reinforces fear and anxiety in the target. Its results in escalated disinterest in work, feeling of disempowerment [49] and shame [66] with reduced organizational commitment [67]. Liefooghe and Davey [41]found that organizational bullying which are results of organizational requirement of growth and survival (see antecedents) may lead to employee insecurity.

3.5. Dealing with Bullying – Targets

Employees facing such psychological turmoil resorts to different coping strategies to keep going. In the initial stages of the problem targets often fail to identify their experiences as bullying, they start finding faults within themselves to comprehend the situation [67], [68]. However, employees who do realise that they are being bullied, try to avoid the situation and take things lightly [44]. On its persistency they try to confront the bully or voice it up to the HR [29]. On continued unresponsiveness towards complains, they accept their fate and prepare themselves for the daily torture, while struggling to maintain their self-esteem and self-integrity [68]. Despite their constant effort of resolve the issue disappointment and despair are evident among targets [64]. Hence, they prefer leaving the organization [29], [34], [64], [68], [69].

Sometimes raising collective voice against the bully has worked in the favour of targets. Interestingly one of the ways of resisting is participating in researches on workplace bullying [70]

3.6 Dealing with Bullying – Non-targets

Despite its known vices organizations fail to deal with workplace bullying effectively. This may be because of number of reasons. Often concerned officials confuse bullying with other organizational and personality conflicts [71], [72]. They may or may not have written policies against bullying as they do not

accept its presence in the organization [4]. Though, mediation is commonly used to solve the problem [71], it is mostly ineffective, due to the alliance between the HR and the perpetrator [29], [64]. Saam[73], have a similar view about mediation. It may fail to give results due to the bigger anomalies at group and organizational levels. Like HR helping the bully by protecting her and covering her wrong doings, leaving the targets at the mercy of their own willpower and tolerance [63], [69]. Also, it depends on the HR officials own perception and limitation to take action against the bullies [22]. The bystanders who try to help the targets, eventually (unwillingly) curb their role as a protector under the pressure of organizational reactions leaving the targets exposed [74], however it works in certain cases [29].

Interventions of bullying may depend on whether an organization wants to recognise bullying or not [4], [72]. Thirwall[75] suggest that organizations are not able to prevent bullying due to their attitude of hiding away from the same. They either, do not understand the profoundness of the problem and provide temporary solutions or ignore it entirely. Hence, multilevel approach is advised, which may target the problem at dyadic, group and organizational level.Barker [76] also advocate a multilevel approach, he suggests that organizations addressing bullying with the principles of positive psychology have higher chances of preventing this evil in the workplace.

Moreover, Georgakopoulos, et al.,[35] and [77] found that students in higher education consider skill based training at all levels may improve the policies regarding prevention of WPB and also suggest simulation exercises at graduate levels which can spread awaresness about the same and help in tackling the issue.

4. Discussion

The existing definitions of WPB do not suffice and are too narrow to integrate various other aspects of the phenomenon. The aspects of organizational bullying, breach of psychological contract, extension of power imbalance and HR dilemmas makes it difficult to explain and address the issue. Hence, with addition of every new insight into the phenomenon, the problem of an inclusive single definition seems unlikely to resolve. Bullying can happen in different forms and every new participant has something to add to the issue. It is not always necessary to have an effect on the physical health of the target but the emotional wellbeing is harmed to a great extent.

Qualitative studies cited in this paper reiterate the notion of overt, covert and/or work related bullying (Barttell & Bartlett, 2011). However, section two reveals different forms of bullying based on the work setting it is being studied in. Health care industry is considered to be the most vulnerable to hostile behaviour. It is also a high risk job to be exposed to such negative acts as it is responsible for peoples' lives. In health care settings employees mostly face group bullying in an undisciplined administrative environment. Although studies in academic setting show similar hostility, however, there is higher work related bullying there compared to interpersonal bullying in health care. Further, the presence of depersonalised bullying add the known literature, which is experienced by different work settings.

Bullying may be caused due to variety of reasons, most common of which are the individual characteristics of both the parties. However, organizational bullying has come out to be the main antecedent in the current review. Politics, corruption, power, culture, restructuring and set policies are quite often stated by the victims to be responsible for bullying prevalence. Also, non-acceptance of bullying by HR and its vagueness makes it difficult to counter the situation. Hence, despite established employee wellbeing policies, prevention of bullying is difficult due to the blindness of organizations.

Lack of organizational efforts to prevent bullying result in its high occurrence. Individuals exposed to it, experience a number of negative physical, psychological and social consequences. Stress, anxiety, depression, sleep disorders, withdrawing from social groups and diminishing performance are usually seen. However, leaving the organization not only is highly opted coping mechanism but is also a major consequence which harms the organizational performance.

However, certain interventions are suggested by consultants and researchers. Mediation, the highly used method may work in certain cases but coaching, organizational development and multilevel training with an approach of positive psychology may reduce the occurrence of workplace bullying. Also, early training at college level may help the students to be aware of this evil and make them prepared to counter it in future. It may also develop future leaders with an empathetic attitude towards the targets. Leaders are the key role players in developing conducive and positive environment in the organizations and hence their early understanding of the phenomenon is vital.

5. Conclusion

Using qualitative methodology to understand a bullying phenomenon may increase its complexity, but it also uncovers the nuances of the same. Addition of minute details from the targets and other concerned players may give new directions to the future researchers. Workplace bullying is a confusing phenomenon. It is embedded across borders and within various work settings (some of them at high risk) however its cognizance is vaguely visible. Based on the current literature the priority should be on spreading awareness within the lay individuals, concerned officials and policy makers regarding the vices of workplace bullying, only then prevention may be possible.

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