

Evasive Actions: The Gendered Cycle Of Stress And Coping For Those Enduring Workplace Bullying In American Higher Education

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Abstract

Previous studies have confirmed that American higher education professionals endure workplace bullying at a rate higher than the general population. Close to two-thirds of American higher education employees were affected by workplace bullying and often endure the bullying at least two to three years. While the frequency of workplace bullying has been examined, along with the corresponding cost of employee disengagement, an analysis of how higher education employees cope with the stress of workplace bullying is absent from the literature. Within the theoretical stress and coping frameworks, this essay examined how higher educational personnel cope with stressful workplace bullying. A chi-square analysis was utilized on a sample (n=355) of American higher education respondents to determine the difference of the gender for respondents' reactions. The chi-square analysis showed that women were more likely to quit/resign from a job in reaction to workplace bullying, and men are more likely to take more sick time in response to workplace bullying.

Keywords: workplace bullying, women, higher education, coping and stress

INTRODUCTION

Internationally, many scholars (Björkqvist et al., 2006; Branch et al., 2013; Cowan, 2012; Duffy & Sperry, 2007; Fritz, 2014; Harvey et al., 2006; Liefoghe & Davie, 2010; Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2007; Zabrodska & Kveton, 2013) have considered the extent of workplace bullying in the general population. American higher education, however, is often absent from these analyses. However, a recent study confirmed that 62% of respondents in American four-year colleges and universities (n=401) were affected by workplace bullying (Hollis, 2015).

To extend knowledge about workplace bullying in higher education, this study was replicated to specifically examine 142 American community colleges to reveal that 64% (n= 200) were affected by workplace bullying (Hollis, 2016a). The initial focus of both studies examined the frequency and cost of workplace bullying in American higher education. The frequency of workplace bullying is much higher than the 37% of the general American population who reported workplace bullying (Namie & Namie, 2009). Further, workplace bullying was a costly behavior that resulted in the loss of \$6869 per person annually for four-year institutions (Hollis, 2015) and the loss of \$7234 per person annually for two-year institutions (Hollis, 2016a). Data from these previous studies indicated that over 50% of the four-year study respondents and 45% of the two-year study reported they had no relief from workplace bullying. Further, the data from both studies conveyed that 70% of four-year respondents endured workplace bullying and 77% of community college personnel endure workplace bullying for over a calendar year.

The instruments in both studies also asked respondents to report on how they reacted to bullying. The answer choices from these previous data collections included many of the elements in the literature about stress and coping (Bernstein & Trimm, 2016; Lazarus, 1993; Olafsson & Johannsdottir, 2004). Therefore, this secondary analysis considered how both the American respondents from the four-year study and the two-year study coped with the stressful workplace bullying in higher education. Further, some researchers have indicated that gender was a critical element in the workplace bullying phenomena (Hollis, 2016b; Karatuna, 2015).

Despite the increased frequency of workplace bullying in higher education, higher education employees stay in their respective jobs for years despite the abuse. Instead of leaving, many cope with the stress. Within this context, this analysis considered how American higher education employees cope with the stress of workplace bullying. This analysis also considered the association between gender and how the target of workplace bullying in higher education reacted.

BACKGROUND

Workplace bullying creates demoralizing situations for employees who often find themselves powerless to correct the situation. While some Canadian provinces, some European countries, Australia, and Turkey have prohibited workplace bullying, the United States is slow to address this problem (Hollis, 2016). Several states have proposed healthy workplace bills to prohibit this abuse for those who experience harassment outside of Title VII civil rights protection. As of 2017, only four states, California, Tennessee, Utah and Minnesota have created abusive conduct statutes since 2014 to protect employees. The working definition of workplace bullying in this study is:

Harassing, offending, socially excluding someone, or negatively affecting someone's work tasks. This behavior occurs repeatedly and regularly over a period of time about six months. With the escalating process, the person confronted ends up in an inferior position and becomes the target of systematic negative social acts. (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011, p. 22).

Also, Einarsen et. al. (2011) noted that targets of workplace bullying were subject to a power differential between themselves and the bully. In this abusive relationship, the target can not advocate for self or respond in kind to abusive conduct (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011; Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2007). In this powerless position, targets of workplace bullying endured stress that had an impact on their health. Rodríguez-Muñoz, Moreno-Jiménez, Sanz Vergei, and Hernandez (2010), reported that 42.6% of long term targets, who have endured bullying at least six months, experienced posttraumatic stress disorder. Other studies by Leymann and Niedl (1994) and Popma (2005) found suicidal ideation was a product of adult workplace bullying.

Targets of workplace bullying in higher education endured such abuse for years; many reported that they endured abuse over two or three years (Hollis, 2015). One of the effects was employee disengagement. Those facing workplace bullying did not trust the organization and reverted to focusing on self-defense instead of the business of the organization. In turn, higher education employees spent 3.9 hours per week dealing with a bully, by strategizing on how to avoid the bully, or thinking of ways to survive interactions with the bully. Such employee disengagement of 3.9 hours a week resulted in five weeks a year wasted per person in employee disengagement (Hollis, 2015).

Given this extended exposure to abuse, targets who dealt with workplace bullying developed hypertension (Bond, Tucked, & Dollard, 2010), stomach problems, sensitivity to colds, and mood swings (Thomas, 2005). Researchers have found that targets of workplace bullying endured sleeplessness, depression, and anxiety (Rodríguez-Muñoz, Notepapers, & Moreno-Jiménez, 2011). In this hostile workspace, targets of workplace bullying recruited allies at work, and cultivated a social network to withstand the bully's hostilities (Dehue, Bolman, Völlink, & Pouwelse, 2012; Stroebe, Zech, Stroebe et al., 2005). Hence, bullying was the antecedent of pervasive stressors, often rendering the target defenseless in the wake of such abuse (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf & Cooper, 2011). When trapped in abusive workplace environments, targets of workplace bullying entered a cycle of coping (Matheny et al., 2002).

Stress and the bully

Stress is a physiological and psychological perception of a threat that motivates one to seek a resolution. Stressors can be biological, mental, or behavioral. For example, the stress of extra weight stacked on an object can lead to the resolution, either breaking that object, or removing the weight. The same logic applies to mental stress. A threat presents itself; therefore, one will take action to solve the problem, remove the stressor, or leave the scenario that created the stressor (Linden, 2005).

Chen (2016) commented that stress was a survival mechanism, designed to alert the body to imminent threats. The body then prepared itself for danger with a heightened awareness and readiness to respond to the heightened possibilities of an attack. This heightened awareness drained energy and left a person feeling exhausted from this increased awareness.

A workplace bully would be a major trigger for the body's stress mechanism. Verbal abuse, unfair treatment, public ridicule, and the other bullying tactics would increase someone's awareness and drain one's energy in preparation for the next potential attack. As a result, the target of workplace bullying is trapped in a constant state of arousal anticipating threats from a more powerful bully. In turn, for the target to continue through the work day, he or she develops strategies to cope with the threatening bully.

Those who face workplace bullying for extended time become candidates for battle fatigue, or posttraumatic stress. When the body experiences chronic threats to safety, whether real or perceived, the sympathetic nervous system becomes overrun with a stimulus, especially if the body never has a chance to regroup. Those subject to constant stress experience sleeplessness, nightmares, depression, and extended anxiety. Other researchers have confirmed that these symptoms coincide with workplace bullying (Cowan, 2012; Thomas 2005). Such stress can affect the nervous system, endocrine systems, immune systems, digestive systems, and reproductive systems (Chen, 2016), deteriorating these systems and rendering them ineffective. Such stress can strain the human system to a point that it deteriorates and becomes ineffective (Childre & Rozman, 2005). In turn, Canada and many Scandinavian countries view workplace bullying as a public health hazard.

THEORETICAL FRAME COPING

If people are caught in the crosshairs of a bully, there is nothing theoretical about the abuse these targets endure in the midst of a bullying scenario. Targets resultantly engage in several coping strategies to minimize their anxiety. Matheny et al. (2002) explain that coping occurs when someone experiences stress. When that person cannot reason through the stressful instance or scenario, the person will then strive to cope with or resolve this stressful tension

through cognitive or physical reactions. These reactions include attempts to face the stress, ignore the stress, or escape the stress (Matheny et al., 2002). Such responses were attempts to cope. From another perspective, Dewe (1991) claimed that coping behaviors are a person's action and reaction to deal with an environment. In short, "because psychological stress defines an unfavorable person-environment, relationship, ... we alter our circumstances, or how they are interpreted to make them appear more favorable- an effort called coping (Lazarus, 1993, p. 8).

In response to workplace bullying, targets exhibit many of the behaviors discussed in the literature on coping with stress (Bernstein & Trimm, 2016). Dehue et. al. (2012) found that targets who deny the presence of bullying or use avoidance as a coping mechanism experienced more health problems by trying to suppress their anxiety. Such denial and silence contributed to the psychological tension that damages the target's self-esteem (Salin, Tenhial, Roerge, & Berndahal, 2014). D'Cruz and Noronho (2012) suggested that targets who were coping with bullying behaviors in their work environments were cognitively striving to reduce unfair and abusive demands often found in bullying scenarios.

Cycle of Coping

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) considered coping with psychological stress as a multi-faceted experience that addressed mental/physical harm, mental/physical threats, or mental/physical challenges. Harm was a loss that has happened in the past; a threat was immediate; a challenge was looming concern for the future (Lazarus, 1993). Coping in relationship to workplace bullying included managing the harms, threats, and challenges associated with bullying. In one of the earliest studies on psychological harassment, Olafsson and Johannsdottir (2004) designated four types of coping associated with enduring a bully that are, seeking help, assertiveness, avoidance, and doing nothing. Bernstein and Trimm (2016) further noted that "seeking help and assertiveness are active strategies, whereas avoidance and doing nothing are passive strategies" (p. 2).

Those coping with stress at first strive to remove the problem, abuser, stressor, or situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Removal and neutralization of harms, threats or challenges, may be mental or physical. Tamres et. al (2002) added an additional step of avoidance, which cognitively changed the response, yet through passive means. These passive strategies included engaging in denial and engaging in distraction. Other strategies that disengaged employees from work were increasing absenteeism, self-isolation (Shematek, 2012) and substance abuse (Lewis & Orford, 2005). Workplace bullying, which included harms, threats, and challenges, triggered this coping cycle for targets in higher education.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS ANALYSIS

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities reported, "In total, after adjusting for inflation, funding for public two- and four-year colleges is nearly \$10 billion below what it was just prior to the recession" (Mitchell, 2016, para. 2). Further, funding per student has dropped below pre-recession levels, with 46 states spending less (Mitchell, 2016). In addition, tuition continues to rise. Though tuition overall is up 33%, higher education has cut classes, turned to contingent faculty and in some cases have closed doors (Mitchell, 2016). These costly threats to higher education have created a stressful work environment with high expectations to perform with fewer resources and with dwindling budgets. In a sector in the midst of facing such economic challenges, workplace bullying adds to an already stressful environment. Weber, Powell and KC Research (2013) reported that bullying and incivility increase during tough financial times, as aggressive personalities heighten their survival strategies.

Therefore, this analysis on how these employees cope with the stress can give employers insight on how staff is functioning within this pressurized environment. Also, these findings can inform higher education employees who may feel traumatized and looking for a better understanding of how colleagues deal with bullying. Such findings may inform managers and supervisors to better understand the impact on staff. Also, targets and their colleagues may gain better insight to how higher education personnel cope with workplace bullying.

METHODS

The initial data collection utilized a 35-question instrument that asked respondents from 175 colleges and universities about their experiences regarding workplace bullying. In the first study, the instrument was beta -tested by five academics in higher education. The workplace bullying study on four-year American colleges and universities was modified to use the existing instrument to address the community college culture. The instrument was e-mailed to faculty and administrators at 142 American community colleges nationally. The findings confirmed that 62% respondents from four-year colleges and universities (Hollis, 2015) and 64% of community college respondents endured bullying (Hollis, 2016a). This secondary analysis examined which coping strategies the four-year respondents and community college respondents respectively use to deal with stressful bullying at work.

Central Research Question

To further analyze coping strategies used by American higher education personnel in response to stressful workplace bullying, the following central research question was developed.

RQ1 How do the targets of workplace bullying in higher education cope with the stress of workplace bullying?

Also, Bernstein and Trim (2016) included avoidance as a coping strategy staff used when facing stress. Therefore, a second research question was developed for this analysis.

RQ2 In the context of workplace bullying in higher education, what is the relationship between gender and the target's use of avoidance strategies (turnover).

H₁ There is a relationship between gender and target's use of avoidance strategies.

H₀ There is no relationship between gender and target's use avoidance strategies.

RQ3 In the context of workplace bullying in higher education, what is the relationship between gender and the target's use of avoidance strategies (sick time)?

H₁ There is a relationship between gender and target's use of avoidance strategies.

H₀ There is no relationship between gender and target's use avoidance strategies.

LIMITATIONS

The analysis was limited to the honest responses from study participants who completed the survey. Both four-year participants and two-year participants were asked their insight about potential departure from the job based on their experience dealing with workplace bullying in higher education. Further, the study was limited to respondents working in American higher education.

VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

This Meta analysis used data from two data collection procedures. Both data sets were collected in the same manner, through an emailed Survey Monkey™ instrument. The community college study was a replication of the four-year study using the same questions regarding stress and coping. Creswell (2009) reflected on reliability and reported that the experience and maturity of the researcher supported reliability.

FINDINGS

The meta-analysis included data from four-year universities and two-year community college respondents. In response to the abuse and stress, respondents engaged in avoidance behaviors such as quitting or taking more sick time. To establish the length of time targets of workplace bullying endured this maltreatment, respondents were asked to consider the original question ‘How long did the target endure workplace-bullying.’ Findings revealed that 181 of 355, or 51% of respondents endured workplace bullying more than 2 years. The data that supported Research Question 1, “how did the target reach to workplace bullying (choose more than one choice),” revealed that 84 of 351 respondents, or 24% admitted to taking more sick time; 93 of 351 respondents, or 26% admitted to resigning or quitting. Chi-square was utilized for Research Question 2 and Research Question 3 to further analyze frequency of behavior or occurrence (Camilla & Hopkins, 1978). This statistical test was applicable for determining if gender was associated with an occurrence (Conway, Evans, Evans & Suttle, 2016). Therefore, data in table 1 revealed how gender was associated with different avoidance behaviors as a reaction to workplace bullying in American higher education.

Table 1

Gender Difference in avoidance behaviors of quit or sick time in response to workplace bullying

		Quit=1	Sick=2	Total
Men	Count	22	22	44
	Expected	26.1	17.9	44
	Count			
Women	Count	71	42	113
	Expected	66.9	46.1	113
	Count			
Total		93	64	157

Avoidance behaviors that were analyzed were quit/resigned, coded as “1” take more sick time, and take more sick time coded as “2.”

In regard to RQ 2, in the context of workplace bullying in higher education, what is the relationship between gender and the target’s use of avoidance strategies (turnover).

H₁ There is a relationship between gender and target’s use of avoidance strategies (turnover).

H₀ There is no relationship between gender and target’s use avoidance strategies (turnover).

H₀ is rejected. Women with an expected count of 66.9 instead had an actual count of 71 are more likely to quit/resign in reaction to workplace bullying. Further, men respondents in this sample with an expected count of 26.1 had an actual count of 22 and therefore less likely to quit/resign. Women respondents in this sample were more likely to quit/resign in reaction to workplace bullying.

In regard to RQ3, in the context of workplace bullying in higher education, what is the relationship between gender and the target's use of avoidance strategies (sick time).

H₁ There is a relationship between gender and target's use of avoidance strategies (sick time).

H₀ There is no relationship between gender and target's use avoidance strategies (sick time).

H₀ is rejected. Women respondents in this sample with an expected count of 46.1 instead had an expected count of 42. Further, men respondents in this sample had an expected count had an expected count of 17.9 but had an actual count of 22. Women were less likely to take sick time in response to workplace bullying and men were more likely to take sick time in response to workplace bullying.

DISCUSSION

Similar to the Salin and Hoel (2013) findings, these findings suggested that workplace bullying appeared to be a gendered phenomenon and not the status free phenomenon discussed in other studies (Nielsen et al. , 2009; Notelaers et al. , 2011). Societies have a division of labor that is often assigned by gender informed expectations. Such inequality created differences for women that made them more susceptible for domineering leadership styles and gendered organizational expectations. These social constructions also had an impact on women's careers (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Hollis, 2016).

Karatuna (2015) conducted a qualitative study that reported five themes for those coping with bullying on the job. The cycle of coping included underestimating the problem, losing patience/confrontation, seeking support, despair/constructive coping, then exit. The last stage, exit, was a last resort when other strategies had failed. The target had given up hope that the problem would be resolved and left the environment.

In this analysis of men and women as targets of workplace bullying, women were more likely to cope through exit/resignation. As women were in lower level positions, they typically have less organizational power to defend against a bully. The findings revealed that women were more likely to quit or resign from a workplace bullying situation in higher education. Consequently, women were more like to interrupt their career trajectory due to workplace bullying. When one resigns from a job to escape a bad situation, the next job does not necessarily mean advancement or promotion, simply an escape from the previous bully.

Because women are more likely to occupy entry and middle management positions, there are more opportunities to transition to another entry level or middle management position. However, this latitude is less viable when leaving for another upper level or executive management position an executive position to another executive position. Further, when employees leave, they lose the advantage of being a viable internal candidate for promotion at their home institution. In a study of 297 participants, the majority saw more justice in hiring the internal candidate (Bradley, 2006). Chan (2006) commented that hiring the internal candidate would be good for the organization as it motivated other workers to strive for solid performance that can eventually be rewarded with promotion. Further, the external candidate is typically more successful at lower level positions; external hires tend to comprise 15- 20% of top management positions. When external candidates are hired, they are typically paid more and have more experience and education than the internal hires (Bidwell, 2011). However, when women leave their home institutions, they become a less favored external candidate at other positions when escaping the bully at their home institution. Such transitions

undermined their chances, as the external candidate if they are competing for the more executive positions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Stouten et al. (2010) reported a negative relationship between ethical leadership and bullying. Leaders who were concerned about workload and work conditions were less likely to be bullies or to allow bullying on the job. Such ethical leaders would be more empathetic and equitable in mitigating workplace strife and conflict. Given the aforementioned findings and the need for ethical leadership to minimize bullying on the job, the following are recommended.

- 1) Develop and maintain ethical leadership that have a proven track record of equity and fairness. Such leaders would minimize the bullying that hurts all employees. Further, by minimizing bullying, the leader also would diminish the cost turnover and retraining cost that is an expensive residual when employees leave.
- 2) Develop and maintain anti-bullying policies for the organization that coincide with anti-harassment and anti-discrimination policies. The findings of this study showed that while workplace bullying does affect everyone, it has a greater impact on women in the organization. Anti-bullying policies can protect all employees and in particular is part of a solid gender equity strategy.
- 3) Maintain a healthy workplace in which leadership and staff have collaboration and civility woven into performance standards. When organizations weave in these values to benchmarks for performance, all involved note the seriousness of the issue and receive feedback.
- 4) Make counseling and ombuds resources available to assist both genders with bullying (Hollis, 2016). Workplace bullying has an unhealthy impact on employees who experience sleep problems, weight swings and depression. Employee assistance programs can help targets of workplace bullying cope with stress on the job. Further, ombuds personnel can assist in collecting organizational data.

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