

Brief Report

Prevalence and incidence of workplace bullying among Spanish employees working with people with intellectual disability

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Abstract

Background: Although workplace bullying is a severe psychosocial risk with a high prevalence, there is a lack of studies addressing its incidence, particularly among staff working with people with intellectual disability.

Objectives: We examined the prevalence and incidence of workplace bullying in a sample of Spanish employees working with people with intellectual disability. The socio-demographic characteristics of victims and non-victims of workplace bullying were also analyzed.

Methods: Multicenter study with two phases (T1 and T2) carried out in Valencia (Spain). The sample consisted of 696 employees from 66 centers in T1. One year later (T2), 422 employees from 61 centers agreed to participate in the study again. Workplace bullying was assessed by means of the instrument “Mobbing-UNIPSICO”.

Results: The prevalence of workplace bullying was 18.9% and 20.4% in T1 and T2, respectively. Of the 335 employees who were not victims of workplace bullying at T1 who were followed up at T2, 36 reported that they suffered workplace bullying a year later, that is, the accumulated incidence was 11%. In contrast, 81 workers who had been victims of workplace bullying at T1 and who were followed up at T2, 32 reported that they did not suffer from workplace bullying a year later. The victims had more stable contracts and more seniority in the organization/job than the non-victims in T1, but this result was not replicated in T2.

Conclusions: Workplace bullying is a phenomenon with substantial prevalence, but also with considerable incidence (11%) among staff working with people with an intellectual disability. © 2013 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Workplace bullying; Prevalence; Incidence; Disability; Longitudinal study

In 2011, the European Agency for Health and Safety at Work¹ pointed out that workplace bullying is a psychosocial risk that severely affects European workers' physical and mental health, resulting in high costs to organizations and serious consequences at societal level (e.g., Benefits and welfare costs due to premature retirement, high costs of disability, high costs of unemployment, and medical costs and possible hospitalization, among others). Societal consequences, however, may vary depending upon the national health system and the social services available in each country.

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Conflicts of interest: The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interests.

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Workplace bullying is defined as “*harassing, offending, socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone's work tasks. In order for the label bullying 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., about 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*”.²

Previous studies have shown great diversity of results regarding the prevalence of workplace bullying. In U.S., approximately 1 in every 6 workers (16.8%) is a victim of workplace bullying,³ and the high percentage found in the study by Stein and colleagues⁴ stands out with 54.7%. In a recent study⁵ with a sample of 2861 workers from distinct areas of work activity in Madrid (Spain), a prevalence of 14% was found.

Regarding the incidence of workplace bullying, previous studies have dealt with this issue in an inappropriate way, if it is understood as the proportion of non-bullied workers

that, after a particular period of time (at least 6 months), become workplace bullying victims. There is some confusion over terminology in various reviewed papers, in which the term incidence is used when, in fact, what is being analyzed is prevalence.^{6,7}

It is well-known that high staff burnout is widespread in services for people with intellectual disabilities.⁸ A recent meta-analysis⁹ has indicated that workplace bullying is significantly related to both job-related and health- and well-being-related outcomes, such as mental and physical health problems, symptoms of post-traumatic stress, burnout, increased intentions to leave, and reduced job satisfaction and organizational commitment. However, as far as we know, the prevalence and incidence of workplace bullying, a significant predictor of burnout in different labor sectors, have not been examined among employees working with people who have an intellectual disability.

The present study attempts to fill this research gap by performing a longitudinal analysis with the following two objectives: first, to examine for the first time the prevalence and incidence of workplace bullying (understood as the proportion of initially non-bullied workers who were workplace bullying victims a year later) in a wide sample of employees working with people who have an intellectual disability. Second, to explore the existence of differences between workplace bullying victims and non-victims at the two study periods with respect to some sociodemographic characteristics.

Method

Participants

The flow diagram is shown in Fig. 1. In the year 2004, (Time 1) a total of 1470 questionnaires were distributed among employees at 66 care centers for people with intellectual disability in Valencia (Spain). The response rate to the study in Time 1 was 47.32%, leading to the participation of 696 workers (547 women) from the 66 centers. The mean age of those taking part was 37.6 years ($SD = 9.5$; range: 19–70). The participants were distributed among 29 occupational centers ($n = 243$), 9-day centers ($n = 101$), 18 care homes ($n = 261$), 6 early stimulation centers ($n = 60$) and 4 rehabilitation and social integration centers ($n = 31$).

In the year 2005 (Time 2), 639 employees were identified (96.8% of the participants at Time 1), but only 422 from 61 centers agreed to answer the questionnaires again at Time 2 and, as such, the response rate was 61.82%. At Time 2, the sample was comprised of 326 women and 83 men with a mean age of 39.3 years ($SD = 9.2$; range: 22–70). In this period, there were 25 occupational centers ($n = 168$), 7-day centers ($n = 45$), 18 care homes ($n = 134$), 7 early stimulation centers ($n = 53$) and 4 rehabilitation and social integration centers ($n = 22$).

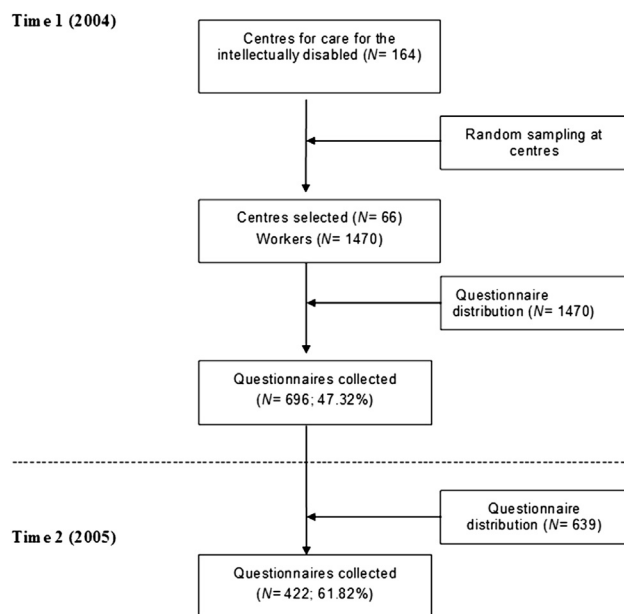


Fig. 1. Longitudinal study flow diagram.

Instruments

Workplace bullying was evaluated by the instrument Mobbing-UNIPSICO.¹⁰ This scale contains 20 items adapted from the *Leymann Inventory of Psychological Terrorization*¹¹ and the *Negative Acts Questionnaire*,¹² taking into consideration the workplace bullying actions that are more frequent in Spain.¹³ The 20 items are evaluated through a scale providing five alternative responses (0 = “Never”, 1 = “Occasionally”, 2 = “A few times a month”, 3 = “A few times a week” and 4 = “Every day”). These items gather information on actions against the possibilities of adequate communication and the possibilities of maintaining social contacts, actions against personal reputation, actions against the exercise of the work, and actions prejudicial to health. There is also one item which asks the participant to indicate other negative actions, which do not appear among the previous 20 items, a second item where the participant has to indicate the frequency of the actions of the above item, and a third item asking how long the participant has suffered the actions on the questionnaire. The instrument Mobbing-UNIPSICO showed high internal consistency ($\alpha > 0.90$ in both study periods) and temporal stability (test-retest = 0.73). Strong evidence of the construct validity of the Mobbing-UNIPSICO was recently provided.¹⁰

Procedure

Stage 1: Sample selection

In the year 2004, taking the “Resource guide for people with disabilities” published by the regional govern as a reference, 66 centers for people with intellectual

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