



What is the evidence? Preventing psychological violence in the workplace



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ABSTRACT

Although criminology has actively engaged with psychological violence in the context of domestic violence and child abuse, it has been slower coming to the fore when it comes to such violence in the workplace. This is despite the well-documented human, organisational, community and service costs associated with such victimisation. As demonstrated in this review, the bulk of strategies that have been trialled to date has been devised from psychology, management and organisational development perspectives. However, there is a paucity of evidence that any of the interventions that are widely promoted have been subjected to robust evaluations or provided evidence of any long-term reduction in the incidence of violence as a consequence of such interventions. Acknowledging there no easy single recipe, it is timely to consider the potential of alternative approaches including the application of guardianship and related principles from the routine activity approach, which are well-established strategies for prevention of victimisation in a range of contexts as set out in this review.

1. The problem

Internationally there has been growing recognition that psychological violence has become a significant cause of workplace injury, with mounting costs not only for individual targets, but equally for businesses, for governments and for the community. Although historically there has been limited attention to the injury done by such violence, increasing awareness of the social, legal and institutional costs of psychological violence has stimulated the interest of governments, regulators, researchers and businesses.

In recognition of the problem, there have been international efforts to determine the prevalence of such violence. However, global comparisons have not been easily achieved. Part of the challenge has been the failure to establish a single internationally agreed definition¹ and unequivocal evidence of the difference between endorsed definitions and the perceptions and experience reported by those who have been targets or witnesses of such abuse (Way, Jimmieson, Bordie, and Hepworth, 2013; Bentley et al., 2009). A second obstacle has been a lack of consensus on the best means of measurement (that is how frequency is determined). Nonetheless, there is universal acknowledgement that a substantial number of victims will not report the abuse, whether due to fear of reprisals, or lack of confidence that action will be taken, or feeling compelled to resign due to the health injuries arising from such mistreatment.

Despite the considerable variation in the methods employed to measure prevalence, international studies point, at a minimum, to the practical scope of the problem. For example, the 2015 European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound, 2013) survey involving 43,000 workers from 35 countries found an average of 16% of workers reported having experienced some form of verbal abuse, threats, humiliating behaviour and sexual attention – an escalation from the previous survey 12 months prior. In the United States some 7% of workers reported experiencing such abuse (Alterman, Luckhaupt, Dahlhamer, Ward, & Calvert, 2013; Namie, Christensen and Phillips, 2014). Safe Work Australia (2014:33) estimated that 3.5% or 195,700 workers experienced psycho-social injuries during the 2012 year, with an estimated cost of \$11.6 billion per year.

Given the prevalence, the costs and the impact of psychological violence, efforts have been made to identify and implement responses intended to minimise risk and deliver more effective responses where the problem arises. Initiatives designed to address potential risk factors have been trialled in public, private and non-government organisations. These strategies have been developed primarily from the disciplinary frameworks of psychology and organisational development or management. Elements or methods that have been promoted as effective in addressing risk factors for such violence have focused on issues such as promoting the use of organisational policy and procedures, adopting recommended management styles, addressing organisational culture,

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¹ Psychological violence is taken to include behaviours which are harassing, bullying, threats, verbal abuse, isolating and alienating and are designed to intimidate the target of such abuse.

and interventions including awareness raising programs and providing education and training regimes to staff across levels and responsibilities. Governments have introduced regulatory and policy changes intended to establish a more uniform approach to prevention and early intervention. Despite such efforts, there is a paucity of evidence of the extent to which such efforts have achieved a substantial impact in the long term.

The aim of this review is to identify the extent to which there is empirical evidence of the effectiveness of interventions to address psychological violence in the workplace. As a scoping study, it has been essential to rely upon reporting by those who have been involved in designing and implementing interventions intended to reduce the risk of psychological violence in the everyday workplace context. Reporting on most interventions refers to some follow up process, often in the form of interviews or surveys, accompanied by reflections of those responsible for the intervention. Finding evidence of independent and robust evaluations of interventions has been more problematic. Previous efforts to locate such evidence have provided a starting point for this review. A consistent finding across these prior scoping studies has been the need for more reliable evidence demonstrating positive, sustainable impacts of interventions, with implications for transferability and generalizability. That has been the rationale for this follow-up review.

It is also timely to consider the potential of drawing from alternative disciplinary approaches that have been usefully applied in reducing the risk of victimisation such as the routine activity approach as outlined in this paper. As we will demonstrate, none of the studies presented in this review focus on the role that bystanders have to play in helping to prevent and disrupt psychological violence in the workplace. Criminological research in a variety of contexts shows that bystanders can successfully assume crime prevention roles that help to protect targets against victimisation or reduce the severity of victimisation. We will argue that the concept of crime controllers—particularly guardians, managers and super controllers—from the routine activity approach and its subsequent extensions, may be usefully applied when we consider strategies for preventing psychological violence in the workplace.

2. What is the evidence? Preventing psychological violence in the workplace

Internationally researchers, regulators, employee representative organisations and practitioners have published guidelines for employers, peer reviewed reports and governmental papers promoting particular processes, strategies, and policies designed to reduce risk and more effectively respond to the challenge of psychological violence. Proponents of these ‘recipes’ claim they offer reliable methods for assessing and addressing risk factors for psychological violence. The challenge lies in being able to produce the empirical evidence of the effectiveness of such resources and the steps they recommend in reducing the incidence and impact of such abuse. A useful precedent is a Victorian study that was designed to document implementation issues experienced by a sample of public service organisations when employing a locally developed toolkit (Barker, 2009). Amongst the recommendations emerging from the initiative was the need to gather further evidence to ensure that any ‘toolkit’ is able to deliver the intended outcomes. The Victorian evaluation provided valuable evidence of barriers to implementation as well as actions required to enhance the effectiveness of the toolkit. This precedent demonstrates the importance of having robust evaluations of the tools and guidelines being promoted as the means by which to establish a healthy work environment and prevent abusive practices.

Prior attempts to identify evaluated interventions have been broadly scoped – that is looking for any evidence irrespective of the type of intervention or rationale. Such searches for evidence have involved combing through electronic databases, applying consistent rules about that which will be included (e.g., must be peer reviewed for example) or

excluding (e.g. intervention must have been evaluated). In some cases searches have extended beyond initial limitations when it became evident that insufficient results were being produced. At the same time the rigor applied in determining whether or not to include a particular study was inconsistent. In some cases studies were included had not been subjected to any real evaluation or in which evaluations were poorly documented. There is a limited number of reports (some of which were published subsequent to the previous meta-analyses) that provide details of how evaluations were conducted moving beyond the more prevalent reporting on the nature of an intervention process. For example simply saying there was a pre- and post-test with little description of what was in these ‘tests’ provides limited basis for appreciating the robustness or relevance of these efforts. It is not possible to determine the quality of the indicators without more detail of the evidence and how it was collected.

Determining the effectiveness of interventions for psychological violence, whether based upon qualitative or quantitative assessments, requires the ability to demonstrate the preventative value based on demonstrable immediate or short term outcomes as well as longer term sustainability. Having reliable base line data of the incidence of such violence when the paucity of reliable reporting is well documented (Schindeler, Ransley, and Reynald, 2016) will undermine the extent to which it is possible to determine the actual impact. Similarly little control over external influences (such as change in organisational leadership, staff turnover) can be difficult to control and figure into any assessment of impacts.

Examination of the cases in which interventions have been carried out and the sites in which they have been introduced requires consideration of a number of factors. Firstly the type of intervention being adopted is usually designed to address a theoretically based explanation of at least one or more risks of offending. Primary interventions can be described as being designed to be preventative in nature and can be characterised as largely organisation-focused. These might include, for example, awareness raising activities, leadership development or identifying systemic factors that may be contributing to risk. Secondary interventions are more likely to be designed to enhance responses to identified risks or patterns of offending. Such interventions are directed to encouraging behavioural change, early action to prevent further harm or building individual resilience, with links to individual or group factors. Interventions which concentrate on specific roles and responsibilities within the organisation, such as human resource management, may focus on improving internal processes. Tertiary interventions are designed to provide effective rehabilitative outcomes. (Parenthetically, there is a considerable gap in the research at the tertiary level with no real evidence with respect to the effectiveness of interventions targeting identified perpetrators). Thus whether interventions are based on a broad reach (through educational, promotional or organisational wide awareness raising activities) or whether they are more targeted (through individual coaching, mentoring or formal training programs) they are expected to address risk factors that are considered contextually relevant. Because of this relationship between type of intervention and theoretical constructs promoting particular types of strategies, recognising contextual relevance is an essential caveat to any claims of potential efficacy.

Another important lesson that needs to be drawn from reporting on completed interventions (whether there is empirical evidence of effectiveness or not) is the identification of those factors which were found to influence the outcome. This means being able to assess the extent to which the results positively (or negatively) reflect on the assumptions upon which the intervention was designed and the method of implementation – that is the processes employed to address risks of psychological violence. Being able to identify and anticipate barriers to effective implementation can be critical in any future successes. This underpins the need for a robust method of evaluation to form part of interventionist activities so that potential obstacles can be avoided in future initiatives. With this in mind, the current study reviews the

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