



Workplace bullying, perceived job stressors, and psychological distress: Gender and race differences in the stress process



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ABSTRACT

A large body of empirical research documents the adverse mental health consequences of workplace bullying. However, less is known about gender and race differences in the processes that link workplace bullying and poor mental health. In the current study, we use structural equation modeling of survey data from the 2010 Health and Retirement Study (N = 2292) and draw on stress process theory to examine coworker support as a buffering mechanism against workplace bullying, and gender and race differences in the relationships between bullying and psychological distress. The results of the analysis indicate that coworker support serves as a protective buffer against workplace bullying, although the buffering effect is relatively small. We also find that the effects of workplace bullying more heavily impact women and persons of color. Specifically, women and African American individuals in our sample were less protected from the buffering mechanism of co-worker social support.

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1. Introduction

Once considered a phenomenon occurring at school in early childhood and adolescence, a large body of literature now demonstrates the substantial prevalence of bullying at the workplace during adulthood (Einarsen et al., 2004; Einarsen et al., 2011; Rayner, 1997; Rayner and Hoel, 1997; Rayner et al., 2002; Zapf and Einarsen, 2001). Workplace bullying broadly refers to ongoing negative acts directed at individuals in hostile work environments through perceived power imbalances in employee relationships (Salin, 2003a). In a recent nationally representative sample of adult Americans, 35% of respondents experienced bullying firsthand at work (Namie, 2010). Experiences of bullying at work occur across all job positions and educational levels of workers, although there are noted gender and racial disparities for women and persons of color (Escartín et al., 2012).

The consequences of workplace bullying directly impact employees and the organizations for which they work. Victims of bullying at work experience increased risk of poor physical and mental health, including measures of cardiovascular disease, post-traumatic stress, and depression (Kivimäki et al., 2003; Kivimäki, Elovainio, and Vahtera, 2000; O'Donnell and MacIntosh, 2016; Vartia, 2001). Furthermore, those who experience workplace bullying report higher levels of burnout

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and absenteeism coupled with lower levels of organizational commitment (Houshmand et al., 2012; Nielsen and Einarsen, 2012). These consequences of workplace bullying are exacerbated when employers, or those in charge, do not respond to reported acts of bullying. In a recent nationally representative sample of Americans, 44% of workers who reported an incident of bullying to a superior stated that the employer did nothing to address the situation (Namie, 2007). Therefore, understanding the complexity of the relationships between workplace bullying and adverse health outcomes is important in order to protect workers from poor physical and mental health and increase organizational commitment.

Despite widespread attention given to the prevalence, causes, and consequences of workplace bullying, few studies exist that examine how workplace bullying may differ depending on gender and race status. Therefore, the purpose of the current study is to contribute to this small body of literature by analyzing how the impact of workplace bullying on mental health outcomes differs among women and non-white individuals. Drawing from stress process theory, we also explore how social support from coworkers buffers the effect of workplace bullying on perceived job stressors and examine if women and non-white individuals benefit equally from this buffering effect. The findings of this analysis highlight the complexity of the connections between bullying in the workplace and adverse health outcomes.

2. Background

Despite several decades of research on workplace bullying, no universal definition of the phenomenon exists. However, there are several common features used by almost all researchers in their conceptualization of workplace bullying. At the most basic level, those who are bullied at work experience some sort of verbal or non-verbal negative behavior, which can be carried out by the perpetrator in overt or covert ways (Saunders et al., 2007). Additionally, workplace bullying results in physiological or psychological harm; those who are bullied have less power than their perpetrators; and those bullied label themselves as such (Saunders et al., 2007). Rayner and Hoel (1997) argue that there are several different types of workplace bullying, including threat to professional status, threat to personal standing, isolation, overwork, and destabilization at the place of employment. In addition to these definitions, one particularly useful conceptualization of workplace bullying includes several categories outlined by Escartín et al. (2011). They argue that workplace bullying can also include emotional abuse (humiliation or other insults), professional discrediting and denigration (belittling the individual's work and skills), and devaluation of the professional role (assigning workers tasks that are useless, meaningless, or do not match the skill level of the employee). Fox and Stallworth differentiate between general bullying and "racial/ethnic bullying," defined as actions that specifically target a person's race or ethnic group (2005:438).

Workplace bullying is a distinct and unique experience compared to the normal, everyday pressures that many individuals are exposed to in the workplace. Indeed, some central characteristics of work in general include negative or stressful interactions with coworkers or bosses, including minor jokes or teasing (Schnurr, 2009), or the pressure to meet imposed deadlines or efficiency standards from managers (Sparks et al., 2001). While these aspects of daily work life may be an anticipated part of joining the workforce, workplace bullying conceptually differs in several ways. Lutgen-Sandvik et al. (2007) argue that workplace bullying exists within a hierarchy of phenomena. The ordinary pressures of everyday work that characterize the culture of organizations exist at the superordinate level and affect all employees. However, workplace bullying is an interpersonal, subordinate phenomenon that does not widely affect all employees but is rather directed at targeted individuals through incivility, social ostracism, or verbal abuse and aggressiveness (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007).

2.1. Consequences of workplace bullying

Many empirical studies find that workplace bullying is associated with severe adverse mental health outcomes for those bullied (Verkuil et al., 2015; Vega and Comer, 2005). For example, in a study of 1613 Norwegian employees, Einarsen and Nielsen (2014) found that individuals exposed to workplace bullying were 1.77 times more likely to exhibit psychological distress compared to those who were not exposed to workplace bullying. Similarly, Kivimäki et al. (2003) and Niedhammer et al. (2006) report that even when controlling for factors such as age, income, and educational level, workplace bullying remained a significant risk factor for depression. Both Einarsen and Nielsen (2014) and Quine (1999) found that anxiety levels were greater among those who were bullied at work compared to those who were not. Furthermore, the adverse mental health consequences of workplace bullying are traumatic and long standing. Drawing on a qualitative analysis of bullied victims from the public service industry, Hallberg and Strandmark found that when attempting to recover from bullying at work, victims felt as if they were "marked for life" (2006: 112). Several studies (Balducci et al., 2009; Matthiesen and Einarsen, 2004; Rodríguez-Muñoz et al., 2010; Tehrani, 2004) provide evidence that workplace bullying causes post-traumatic stress for those who were targeted victims. In a longitudinal study of workplace bullying and mental health, Finne et al. (2011) found that workplace bullying was a significant predictor of mental distress, even after two years had passed from the initial incident. Accordingly, hypothesis one of our study states that for all individuals, there is a positive relationship between workplace bullying and psychological distress.

2.2. Gender and race differences in workplace bullying

Compared to the substantial body of knowledge on workplace bullying and adverse mental health outcomes developed over the past 30 years, comparatively less attention has been paid to race and gender disparities in workplace bullying

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