



Workplace psychological harassment: Gendered exposures and implications for policy



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ABSTRACT

This article reports on the results of an empirical study of working conditions including psychological harassment (workplace bullying) in the province of Québec, Canada, the first North American jurisdiction to regulate psychological harassment in its labor legislation.

All empirical data provided in this article was drawn from the *Québec Survey on Working, Employment and Occupational Health and Safety Conditions*, conducted through 5071 telephone interviews of a representative sample of Québec workers, including the self-employed. Here we focus on employees, and provide bivariate and multivariate analyses. All analyses were stratified by gender.

We provide a portrait of exposure to psychological harassment, and exposure to other psychosocial factors in the workplace associated with exposure to psychological harassment. Results show associations between exposure to psychological harassment and negative health measures including psychological distress, symptoms of depression, traumatic work accidents, musculoskeletal disorders and negative perception of health status. We report on steps taken by employees to put an end to the harassment. Gender similarities and differences in exposure, associated risk factors, health measures and strategies are presented and discussed in light of the legal context in which the study took place. We conclude with recommendations for prevention strategies that take into consideration the gender composition of the workplace.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, workplace harassment, including both psychological harassment (PH or bullying) and discriminatory harassment (Lewis, Giga, & Hoel, 2011), has been the subject of considerable attention from legislators and policy makers both in Europe and in the Americas (Lippel, 2010; Yamada, 2011). Parallel to these policy developments, a significant body of scholarship has examined prevalence of PH (Zapf, Escartin, Einarsen, Hoel, & Vartia, 2011), its determinants (Salin & Hoel, 2011) and its health consequences (Hogh, Mikkelsen, & Hansen, 2011), including consequences to both physical (Hogh et al., 2011; Kivimäki et al., 2003) and mental health (Lahelma, Lallukka, Laaksonen, Saastamoinen, & Rahkonen, 2012). Relatively few have focused on gender issues related to exposure to harassment or health measures associated with those exposures (Salin, 2015; Zapf et al., 2011) aside from studies on sexual or sex-based harassment (Cortina & Kubiak, 2006; Kabat-Farr & Cortina, 2014).

Salin and Hoel provided a review of the English language literature on organizational causes of workplace psychological harassment and bullying. They discussed a broad range of organizational factors associated with the psychosocial work environment, including not only work organization but also organizational culture, leadership, reward systems and organizational change, and identified many factors that have been found to be associated with workplace bullying. The literature reviewed found role conflict and role ambiguity to be among the strongest predictors of workplace bullying. The authors also noted that work intensification and increased pressure, in several recent studies, have been found to be a precursor to bullying and harassment, and discussed the literature on the relationship between bullying and high job strain (high demands accompanied by low decision latitude) (Salin & Hoel, 2011).

A study of Australian police officers that found associations between stressful working conditions (iso-strain, or exposure to high psychological demands, low decision latitude and low social support) and bullying provided pathways to explain the link between the psychosocial work environment and negative interactions, including bullying. The authors suggest three pathways. Stressful working conditions may: raise employee arousal and lower the threshold for anger, aggression and conflict within a work group; increase the likelihood that employees will voice concerns, which may

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be met with punitive responses from supervisors; and trigger the projection of anger, frustration and tension down the line from managers to subordinates and across work groups from one employee to another (Tuckey, Dollard, Hosking, & Winefield, 2009, p. 228). Studies in the French language literature have also examined organizational factors associated with workplace bullying and harassment. Looking at the SUMER national survey in France, Bouville and Campoy (2012/2013) tested a series of hypotheses related to organizational factors and found associations between PH and all the organizational factors studied, including job strain, low social support from supervisors and colleagues and strained or aggressive interactions with the public. They conclude that prevention of PH must focus on organizational factors rather than simply examine individual relations between bullies and their victims.

A recent Finnish study found that both leadership and job demands were significantly associated with bullying. Constructive leadership was associated with lower levels of bullying while those reporting higher levels of job demands reported an almost four times higher risk of bullying than those with low job demands, a result that was particularly striking in men although significant for both sexes. This study also found links with poor physical work environment and bullying (Salin, 2015).

While a broad range of regulatory strategies have been implemented to promote the prevention of this type of workplace abuse, little is known about the gendered experiences of workers who are targets of harassment and the policy literature has not, to date, considered the need for adaptation of workplace prevention strategies to the gender composition of the workplace as well as the policy context of the specific interventions.

This article reports on data drawn from an empirical study of exposure to workplace psychosocial risk factors, including occupational violence, in the French-speaking province of Québec, Canada. Québec, a province of roughly 8.1 million inhabitants, was the first North American jurisdiction to regulate “psychological harassment”, with legislation coming into force in 2004 that made employers responsible for providing a workplace free of psychological harassment.

Psychological harassment is the term used in the Québec legislation, the first in North America to go beyond prohibition of discriminatory harassment, covered in human rights legislation in most jurisdictions, to regulate workplace bullying. Much has been written about definitions, both those integrated in law and policy (Lippel, 2010) and those used for research purposes (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011). Legislation and policy in Anglo-Saxon jurisdictions sometimes use the word “harassment” to describe discriminatory harassment based on prohibited grounds of discrimination (Caponecchia & Wyatt, 2009; Lewis et al., 2011), while reserving “workplace bullying” for a different phenomenon, unrelated, or at least not necessarily related to discrimination. However this linguistic distinction is inapplicable in French-speaking and Spanish-speaking jurisdictions, that use “harcèlement moral ou psychologique” or “acoso moral” to designate what the Anglo-Saxon literature describes as bullying (Lippel, 2010).

We will provide a portrait of exposure to psychological harassment of men and women workers, and exposure to other psychosocial factors in the workplace and certain health measures associated with exposure to PH. We will then examine results regarding strategies of those workers to put an end to the harassment, and discuss the results in light of the policy context in which the study took place. We will conclude with reflections on the implications of our results for prevention strategies that take into consideration the gender composition of the workplace.

2. Materials and methods

This article relies on data drawn from an empirical study (Section 2.1) as well as a legal analysis of the regulatory framework in which the study took place (Section 2.2).

2.1. Québec survey on working, employment and OHS conditions

All empirical data provided in this article was drawn from the *Québec Survey on Working, Employment and OHS Conditions* (EQCOTESST), a survey undertaken at the behest of Québec's Ministry of Labour. The survey was developed by a research team that included researchers and advisors from several governmental organizations: the *Institut de recherche Robert-Sauvé en santé et sécurité du travail* (IRSST), the *Institut national de santé publique du Québec* (INSPO), the *Institut de la statistique du Québec* (ISQ), the *ministère du Travail*, the *ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux* and the *Commission des normes du travail* (CNT, which is Québec's labor standards commission). The Institut de la statistique du Québec implemented the survey, which was conducted through telephone interviews of 5071 randomly selected workers comprising a representative sample of the target population. The target population was defined as Québec workers 15 years of age and over, who held paid jobs as either salaried employees or self-employed workers for at least 8 weeks and who were working 15 h a week or more. Data was collected between November 1, 2007 and February 11, 2008. The interviews, in either English or French, lasted an average of 35 min. Response rate was 62%. To allow inference regarding the targeted population all estimates presented in the survey report were weighted in relation to Statistics Canada's *Labour Force Survey*, and several worker characteristics were used to correct for non-response and to calibrate the weightings attributed. These included age group, sex, type of work contract and region of residence.

The published report, in French only, provided bivariate analyses of exposures to physical and psychosocial factors (Vézina, Cloutier, et al., 2011; Vézina, Stock, et al., 2011) including: psychological work demands, decision latitude, social support at work, job strain (a combination of high demands and low latitude), iso-strain (a combination of high job strain and low social support at work), job rewards (recognition at work) and effort–reward imbalance. Questions were drawn from the Job Content Questionnaire (Karasek, 1985), an instrument widely used to measure job demands, decision latitude and job strain (Karasek et al., 1998) and Siegrist's effort–reward imbalance measures developed in 2003, the psychometric properties of which are discussed by Siegrist and colleagues (Siegrist, Li, & Montano, 2014). Other organizational risk factors measured included: emotionally exacting work, lacking adequate means to do quality work and the lack of possibility of taking breaks or modifying the work pace. Physical work demands measured included biomechanical factors, such as forceful exertion, repetitive work, certain awkward or static postures, the handling of heavy loads, hand–arm and whole-body vibration. A complete list of the questions underpinning each measure can be found in Annex 1.

Composite measures discussed in this article include job strain, iso-strain, and effort–reward imbalance. Job strain and iso-strain are composite measures developed by Karasek and Theorell (Karasek & Theorell, 1990). Job strain refers to working conditions that produce high psychological demand accompanied by low decision latitude. Iso-strain adds the dimension of isolation as measured by absence of social support (Johnson, 1989; Johnson, Hall, & Theorell, 1989) to job strain. Working conditions that expose a worker to high psychological demands, low decision latitude and low social support increase the likelihood of various negative physical or psychological health outcomes. The effort–reward imbalance measure proposed by Siegrist (Siegrist, 1996; Siegrist et al., 2004) is based on the finding that work situations characterized by a combination of high effort and low reward are associated with emotional and physiological reactions. While the individual measures that make up each of these composite measures affect health, it is the combination of these factors that have the most negative impact on health, iso-strain, in the Karasek model and effort–reward imbalance in the Siegrist model.

Employment insecurity was measured as an index that is positive if a worker meets one of the two following conditions: agrees or strongly agrees with the idea that he or she has poor job security and/or has

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