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Review

Exposure to workplace harassment and the Five Factor Model of personality: A meta-analysis

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ABSTRACT

Although a growing body of studies has investigated the role of personality traits as correlates of exposure to workplace harassment, the true magnitude of the relationships between harassment and targets' personality characteristics remains unknown. To address this issue, relationships between traits in the Five-Factor Model of personality and exposure to harassment were examined by means of meta-analysis. Including studies published up until January 2015, 101 cross-sectional effect sizes from 36 independent samples, totaling 13,896 respondents, showed that exposure to harassment was positively associated with neuroticism ($r = 0.25$; $p < 0.01$; K = 32), and negatively associated with extraversion ($r = -0.10$; $p < 0.05$; K = 17), agreeableness ($r = -0.17^{**}$; $p < 0.01$; K = 19), and conscientiousness ($r = -0.10^{*}$ $p < 0.05$; K = 22). Harassment was not related to openness ($r = 0.04$ $p > 0.05$; K = 11). Moderator analyses showed that the associations between harassment and neuroticism, agreeableness and conscientiousness, respectively, were conditioned by measurement method for harassment, type of harassment investigated, and geographical origin of study. Summarized, the findings provide evidence for personality traits as correlates of exposure to workplace harassment.

1. Introduction

The relationships between personality and exposure to workplace harassment have been examined in a range of studies (e.g., Bamberger & Bacharach, 2006; Bowling, Beehr, Bennett, & Watson, 2010; Milam, Spitzmueller, & Penney, 2009). While some studies show clear differences in personality dispositions between victims and non-victims of harassment (Coyne, Seigne, & Randall, 2000; Rammsayer, Stahl, & Schmiga, 2006), others indicate that personality traits do not easily differentiate harassed from non-harassed employees (Glasø, Nielsen, & Einarsen, 2009; Lind, Glasø, Pallesen, & Einarsen, 2009). Based on the contradicting findings of individual studies it is therefore difficult to conclude whether or not personality dispositions actually are associated with exposure to workplace harassment. Hence, an unresolved issue in psychology is therefore whether, and eventually how, personality characteristics of targets are related to workplace harassment.

Valid knowledge about correlates of workplace harassment is important for the understanding of the phenomenon (Bowling & Beehr, 2006), and is needed for theoretical, applied, and methodological reasons. That is, in order to build comprehensive theoretical models of

the nature, causes, and consequences of harassment, the individual characteristics of targets must be understood (Milam et al., 2009; Zapf & Einarsen, 2011). For applied purposes, managers, consultants and HR personnel need to understand the true role of personality traits in order to avoid being a captive of the fundamental attribution error which may lead them to overestimate the role these dispositions play in the harassment process when handling actual cases (Ross, 1977). Likewise, psychologists, counselors and even family physicians, need information about the role of personality characteristics when involved in the treatment and rehabilitation of targets. Methodologically, we need to know to which extent we must control for personality dispositions when investigating other plausible causes of harassment, such as leadership and job characteristics (see also Spector & Brannick, 2011; Spector, Zapf, Chen, & Frese, 2000).

Meta-analysis has been viewed as an efficient approach to synthesize research findings, especially since stronger conclusions can be reached compared to individual studies or traditional impressionistic literary reviews (Hunter & Schmidt, 2004; Lipsey & Wilson, 2001). Although a meta-analysis does not resolve the limitations inherent in the existing individual studies, this approach has the advantage of shifting the focus to the whole body of research on a given topic by bringing effects, strengths, and limitations of the field into sharper focus. Using meta-analysis, we will add to the current understanding of the relationships between personality dispositions and harassment,

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as well as factors that influence these relationships, by 1) determining cross-sectional associations between exposure to psychological harassment at work and the traits in the Five Factor Model (FFM) of personality, and 2) determine the impact of geographical origin of studies, sampling method, measurement method of harassment, and form of harassment as possible moderators of the associations between FFM-traits and exposure to harassment.

2. Definitions and theoretical background

It is common to distinguish between physical and psychological forms of harassment. Whereas the former describes aggressive acts of a direct physical nature, e.g., sexual harassment and even physical assault/violence, the latter refers to mistreatment of workers of a non-physical nature which in the scientific literature has been conceptualized with a range of labels such as abusive supervision (Tepper, 2007), incivility (Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001), bullying/mobbing (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011), victimization (Aquino & Thau, 2009), interpersonal deviance (Berry, Ones, & Sackett, 2007), emotional abuse (Keashly, 1998), ostracism (Williams, 2007), and social undermining (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002). It has been argued that this proliferation of constructs has led to a confusing state of affairs in which many scholars are studying virtually identical forms of mistreatment of subordinates and fellow workers, but with different terminology (Hershcovis, 2011; Raver & Barling, 2007). To avoid such proliferation, we will, in line with the seminal work "The harassed worker" by Carroll Brodsky (1976), use *workplace harassment* as a higher order construct to describe different forms of non-physical yet systematic mistreatment of and among employees. As the aim of this study was to examine psychological and emotional harassment, exposure to physical aggression will not be assessed.

According to Brodsky (1976, p. 2), workplace harassment is defined as repeated and persistent attempts by one person to torment, wear down, frustrate or get a reaction from another. It is treatment that persistently provokes, pressures, frightens, intimidates, or otherwise discomforts the target. Hence, workplace harassment is not about isolated and one-off instances of aggression, but do rather refer to ongoing and repeated exposure to mistreatment. These main elements of Brodsky's definition have been integrated in later conceptualizations of harassment. For instance, Tepper (2007) defines abusive supervision as the extent to which subordinates perceive supervisors to engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors while at work, yet excluding physical abuse. Similarly, Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy and Alberts (2007, p. 837) define workplace bullying as "a type of interpersonal aggression at work that goes beyond simple incivility and is marked by the characteristic features of frequency, intensity, duration and power imbalance". Although there is no definitive list of harassing behavior, harassment mainly involves exposure to verbal hostility, being made the laughing stock of the department, having one's work situation obstructed, or being socially excluded from the peer group. Empirically, such behavior has been differentiated into seven categories: work-related harassment, social isolation, attacking the private sphere, verbal aggression, the spreading of rumors, intimidation, and attacking personal attitudes and values (Zapf, Knorz, & Kulla, 1996). In some cases physical forms of intimidation or even threats occur in conjunction with such acts.

Due to inconsistencies and differences in definitions, operationalizations, and measurement methods (Nielsen, Matthiesen, & Einarsen, 2010), as well as cultural and geographical differences (Van de Vliert, Einarsen, & Nielsen, 2013), estimates of the prevalence of harassment varies from one study to another. For example, in a large scale study among US employees, 41.1% of the respondents, representing nearly 47 million workers, reported exposure to some sort of psychological harassment over the past 12 months (Schat, Frone, & Kelloway, 2006). Altogether 31.4% of these workers experienced harassment on a weekly basis. In a study employing latent class

cluster analysis in a representative sample of Norwegian employees assessing the prevalence of destructive leadership, it was established that 6% of the respondents had observed highly abusive supervision over the last six months (Aasland, Skogstad, Notelaers, Nielsen, & Einarsen, 2010). Finally, in a meta-analysis of 102 prevalence estimates of workplace bullying, a global rate of 14.6% was established across 86 independent samples comprising 130,973 respondents (Nielsen et al., 2010). These numbers clearly show that workplace harassment is a large-scale problem faced by many employees even on a daily basis.

Harassment is not only a prevalent problem, but also one with strong detrimental outcomes for those targeted (Høgh, Mikkelsen, & Hansen, 2011), as well as for the organization as such (Hoel, Sheehan, Cooper, & Einarsen, 2011). With regard to individuals, both cross-sectional and longitudinal evidence suggests that exposure to psychological harassment in the workplace has detrimental effects on the targets´ health and well-being (see Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Hershcovis, 2011; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012; Nielsen, Indregard, & Øverland, 2016; Nielsen, Tangen, Idsoe, Matthiesen, & Magerøy, 2015 for meta-analytic overviews; Verkuil, Atasayi, & Molendijk, 2015). In longitudinal research, psychological and somatic health problems, such as anxiety (Finne, Knardahl, & Lau, 2011), depression (Kivimäki, Elovainio, & Vathera, 2000; Kivimäki et al., 2003), suicidal ideation (Nielsen, Nielsen, Notelaers, & Einarsen, 2015) and muscle-skeletal problems (Tynes, Johannessen, & Sterud, 2013), are among the observed individual health outcomes. However, a reoccurring finding in several of the prospective studies is that symptoms of distress also predict subsequent exposure to workplace harassment (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012; Nielsen, Magerøy, Gjerstad, & Einarsen, 2014). Based on these findings it has therefore been questioned whether specific individual characteristics and dispositions of the target constitute a vulnerability factor with regard to exposure to harassment or whether exposure to harassment leads to changes in individual dispositions among targets of harassment (Glasø, Matthiesen, Nielsen, & Einarsen, 2007; Kivimäki et al., 2003; Nielsen, Hetland, Matthiesen, & Einarsen, 2012).

According to Nielsen and Knardahl (2015) there are at least four different causal mechanims that can explain how individual dispositions may be related to workplace harassment. Serving as a null-hypothesis, the *no-relationship mechanism* suggests that exposure to harassment is not associated with individual dispositions at all. Building on the concept of "provocative victims" (Olweus, 1993), the second mechanism, labeled *the target-behavior mechanism*, suggests that employees with specific dispositions elicit aggressive behaviors in others through violating expectations, underperforming, and even breach social norms of polite and friendly interactions (Einarsen, 1999; Felson, 1992). As a third explanation, *the negative perceptions mechanism* suggests that certain individual dispositions are associated with a lowered threshold for interpreting behaviors as negative and as harassing and that employees with such dispositions therefore have a higher risk than others for labeling and reporting negative events at the workplace as harassment (Nielsen, Notelaers, & Einarsen, 2011). Finally, *the reverse causality mechanism* view individual dispositions as outcomes rather than antecedents of workplace harassment something which implies that exposure to workplace harassment is a traumatic stressor which causes changes in individual dispositions among those exposed (Leymann, 1996).

3. The Five Factor Model of personality and workplace harassment

While there are several different theories about the nature and content of individual dispositions, trait theories, with the FFM as the prominent model, seems to be most influential in contemporary psychology (McCrae & Costa, 1987, 1991). Being founded through theory and a large body of empirical evidence, the FFM suggest that personality traits, i.e., an individual's tendency to think, feel, and act in consistent ways, can be structured into the five broad dimensions extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, neuroticism (emotional stability), and openness to experience (McCrae & John, 1992). Building on the explanatory mechanisms suggested by Nielsen and Knardahl (2015),