



The incongruity of workplace bullying victimization and inclusive excellence

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Bullying occurs frequently—and with significant negative outcomes—in workplace settings. Once established, bullying endures in the workplace, requiring the interaction of a bully perpetrator and an intended target who takes on the role of victim. Not every target becomes a victim, however. The purpose of this study is to investigate the processes by which targets, intended objects of bullies' affronts, become victims, those individuals who experience ongoing emotional injury in response to bullies' affronts, and to clarify how bullying victimization impedes inclusive excellence in the workplace.

Design: The design for this study was pragmatic utility, an inductive research approach grounded in assumptions of hermeneutics.

Methods: The pragmatic utility process involved the investigators' synthesis of descriptions from a broad, interdisciplinary published literature. Integrating knowledge from their previous research and practice experiences with the pragmatic utility process, they derived qualitative features of victims' experiences, differentiating target from victim in bullying encounters.

Findings: For those targets who ultimately are victimized, response to bullies' affronts extends far beyond the immediate present. Redolence of personal, lived experience revives bygone vulnerabilities, and naïve communication and relationship expectations reinforce a long-standing, impoverished sense. That sense couples with workplace dynamics to augment a context of exclusion.

Conclusion: Findings suggest that, as Heidegger contended, we are our histories. Personal history demonstrates a significance influence on the manifestation of bullying victimization, acting to distance them from their workplace peers and to impede inclusive excellence.

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Bullying occurs frequently—and with significant negative outcomes—in workplace settings, interfering not only with work productivity but also with establishment of a culture of inclusive excellence. Inclusive excellence demands organizationally systemic actions that focus specifically on enhancement of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accountability; however, because workplace bullying sets up stable and often unexamined power dynamics favoring bully perpetrators relative to their targeted victims, it countermands the very core features that constitute inclusive excellence. Bullies' marginalizing behaviors undermine the safety and respect that are essential to inclusive excellence in the workplace.

The profound negative consequences of workplace bullying victimization, as they transpire for victims and organizations as wholes, are well established in the literature. A 2007 workplace bullying institute survey (<http://www.workplacebullying.org/wbiresearch/wbi-2007/>) indicated that 45% of bullying targets experienced emotional and physical sequelae as a result of their bullying experiences. Moreover, findings of a 2014 workplace bullying institute survey (<http://workplacebullying.org/multi/pdf/2014-Survey-Flyer-A.pdf>) indicated that for 61% of targets, losing their jobs was the only way to stop the bullying.

The potential impact of workplace bullying victimization on the establishment and maintenance of a culture of inclusive excellence prompted this study. In particular, the research team sought to examine how it is that bullying targets, that is, those who are the *objects of bullies' affronts*, become vulnerable to bullying assaults, shifting in perspective to become victims, or *parties injured by bullies' affronts*, and subsequently to the abandonment characterizing workplace exclusion. Using pragmatic utility, an inductive research approach grounded in assumptions of hermeneutics (Hawkins & Morse, 2014; Morse, 2000; Weaver & Morse, 2006), the investigators endeavored to qualitatively describe bullying victimization processes, and to closely examine how bullying victimization operates, contributing to the obstruction of inclusive excellence in the workplace.

Background and Context

The prevalence of published reports regarding workplace bullying emphasizes its rampant evolution, particularly in health care and higher education settings (Keashly & Neuman, 2010). Even a quick review of popular Web sites or print documents affirms pervasive consideration of workplace bullying, horizontal violence, incivility, or (when multiple bully and target dyads are involved) mobbing—all synonyms for ongoing and dysfunctional interpersonal power relations. In boardroom, office, practice, and classroom settings, workplace employees worldwide report increasing incidences of bullying, sometimes provoked

by superiors, but as often incited by peers or subordinates (Wright & Hill, 2015) whose mendacious actions are difficult to name and categorize, much less to fault (Lipinski & Crothers, 2014).

In and of themselves, the assaults of workplace bullies tend to be hollow—inaccurate, largely baseless, and trivial; yet, as inconsequential as they may appear, they actually convey persuasive, subtle, and often nonverbal messages about the power and privilege of a given bully assailant (Berlingieri, 2015; Kennison, 2013) relative to the intended target. Walrafen, Brewer, and Mulvenon (2012) recently provided a concise example of the kinds of fatuous actions that constitute workplace bullying: “Two nurses drew mustaches on a staff member's picture at the desk” (p. 10). Paradoxically, through trifling and not-infrequent acts such as these, “employees may not only be stripped of their dignity ... but they may also be suffering serious physical, psychological, and emotional consequences” (Carbo, 2009, p. 102).

Those who are victimized by their bully counterparts readily find themselves systematically overlooked in workplace operations, excluded from social activities and from decisions and actions central to the day-to-day operations of their employing organizations (Goodboy, Martin, Knight, & Long, 2015). King (2011) offered a poignant example of the way bullying exclusion ensues, describing the experience of one woman among a group of peers: “she tried to smile, the way people do when they know the joke is on them, but not why” (p. 445).

Identified through many monikers—incivility, social undermining, and aggression, for example (Hershcovis, 2011)—workplace bullying generally is understood to comprise sets of antagonistic and repeated interpersonal behaviors that incorporate verbal and nonverbal communications aimed to establish the social dominance and power of the bully perpetrator relative to an intended target or group. The legitimization of workplace bullying behaviors can be argued to emanate from bully perpetrators' effective simultaneous enactment of *both* coercive and aggressive interpersonal strategies—strategies that are inherently perverse and off-putting—and responsive, prosocial strategies—strategies that draw others toward them (Shorey & Dzurec, 2016). Through this bistrategic approach to others (Hawley, 1999), bullies establish an interpersonal *gestalt* that paradoxically and concomitantly incorporates both acceptance and awe-related fear on the parts of others (Dzurec, 2013). The behaviors that bullies use to establish legitimacy can be intentional, planned purposefully to socially damage intended targets, or they can simply reflect instances of “reckless disregard” (Parzefall & Salin, 2010, p. 763) through which ongoing contempt for others is irresponsibly instituted and perpetuated. In either case, bullies' actions serve to induce shame in those who are victimized (Dzurec, Kennison, & Albatineh, 2014) and, often as importantly, disparagement among bystanders (Paull, Omari, & Standen, 2012).

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