The role of work stressors, coping strategies and coping resources in the process of workplace bullying: A systematic review and development of a comprehensive model

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ABSTRACT

Both work- and person-related factors may trigger workplace bullying. Work-related factors, such as role stressors, can create a stressful work environment leading to bullying. Additionally, person-related factors, such as emotion-focused coping, could make employees more vulnerable to bullying. In this study, we aimed to develop a comprehensive model integrating these factors. We systematically reviewed studies published between 1984 and 2014. First, we identified the most relevant work-related stressors (role conflict, workload, role ambiguity, job insecurity and cognitive demands) as predictors of being a target of workplace bullying. Second, problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies that may moderate the association between stressors and targets of bullying were identified. Third, coping resources that are associated with coping strategies were indicated. Results suggested a model in which reappraisal coping, confrontive coping, practical coping, direct coping, active coping, social support (problem-focused coping) and self-care (emotion-focused coping) decrease the association between work stressors and bullying (i.e. buffer-effect). Wishful thinking, emotional coping, avoidance, recreation, social support and suppression (emotion-focused coping) increase this association (i.e. boost-effect). Coping resources (locus of control, self-efficacy, optimism, co-workers support, supervisor support, task complexity, participation in decision-making, autonomy and continuance commitment) related positively to problem-focused coping strategies and negatively to emotion-focused coping strategies.

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1. Introduction

Workplace bullying is defined as a long-term process in which an employee is systematically and repeatedly targeted with work-related (e.g. withholding information) and/or personal (e.g. insults) negative acts at work (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011). Over the past years, research has demonstrated the detrimental consequences of bullying for employees' mental health and well-being (e.g. Hansen et al., 2006; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012; Vartia, 2001), as well as the direct and indirect costs for the employer (Hoel, Sheehan, Cooper, & Einarsen, 2011). Studies have also highlighted a range of potential antecedents (e.g. Baillien, Neyens, De Witte, & De Cuyper, 2009; Notelaers, De Witte, & Einarsen, 2010). To date, these antecedents have been investigated in two separate lines of research. The first and dominant line of research has identified a wide plethora of work-related factors that cause bullying. Work-related factors relate to "aspects of the working environment that require sustained physical and/or psychological effort or skills and are therefore associated with certain physiological and/or psychological costs" (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, p. 312). Examples are role stressors, leadership styles and organizational climate (e.g. Salin & Hoel, 2011; Skogstad, Torsheim, Einarsen, & Hauge, 2011). These studies were predominantly inspired by the Work Environment Hypothesis, which states that workplace bullying is triggered by a stressful work environment (Leymann, 1996). The second and smaller line of research has focused on person-related causes of bullying; some employees may be more vulnerable to workplace bullying than others due to person-related factors (e.g. Vartia, 1996; Zapf, 1999). Person-related factors relate to "aspects of the self that are generally linked to resilience and refer to the individuals' sense of ability to control and impact upon their environment successfully" (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2007, p. 123–124). Examples are negative affect (Bowling, Beehr, Bennett, & Watson, 2010), low core self-evaluation (Bowling et al., 2010) and low social skills (Zapf, 1999).

Despite the growing knowledge on the antecedents of workplace bullying, many studies have failed to combine these two lines of research by focusing on both work- and person-related factors (for an exception see; Balducci, Fraccaroli, & Schaufeli, 2011; Mathisen, Ogaard, & Einarsen, 2012). However, Einarsen (1999) stated that both personal- and work-related factors are important in the prediction of workplace bullying (p. 20). Likewise, Zapf (1999) concluded that one-sided explanations on the causes of workplace bullying – focussing on either personal- or work-related factors – are inappropriate (p. 70). Additionally, it seems plausible that, in addition to their main effects, work and personal factors may interplay or interact in predicting workplace bullying (Balducci, Fraccaroli and Schaufeli, 2011; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Hence, both personal- and work-related factors should be combined into one model on the causes of workplace bullying. In reply, the general aim of this study is to develop a model that includes the interaction between work- and personal aspects in the prediction of being a target of workplace bullying.

Numerous scholars have presented models on workplace bullying that could relate to this aim (e.g. Baillien et al., 2009; Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Neuman & Baron, 2011; Salin, 2003; Samnani & Singh, 2012; Zapf, 1999). These models are, however, conceptual by nature and provide a rather general overview on personal and work-related factors as antecedents of bullying. In reply, we attempt to develop a comprehensive model that integrates the interaction between personal and work-related factors and specifies their relationship with being a target of workplace bullying. Moreover, whereas previous models were based on a general, unstructured inspection of literature, this study systematically reviews the literature to enhance our understanding of the predicting processes of being a target of workplace bullying (Liberati et al., 2009). Our comprehensive model may eventually provide guidelines for future research and may particularly assist researchers in conducting intervention studies, which

have been called repeatedly in the bullying research field (Vartia & Leka, 2011).

In this study, work and person-related factors are predicted to interact in predicting workplace bullying, in line with observations in the bullying field (Balducci, Cecchin, & Fraccaroli, 2012) and in the broader field of work psychology (Xanthopoulou et al., 2007). Specifically, person-related factors may moderate the association between work-related stressors and strain outcomes such as workplace bullying (see Baillien, De Cuyper, & De Witte, 2011; Zapf, 1999). To construct a comprehensive model by means of a systematic review of the literature, specific steps are followed. First, we will identify the most relevant work stressors with respect to future workplace bullying. Work stressors are work-related factors referring to a transaction between the individual and the environment (Cooper, Dewe, & O'Driscoll, 2001). Work stressors are demands induced by the external environment that cannot be managed with the resources of the individual. This causes an imbalance between these demands and resources, which affects individuals' physical and psychological well-being and requires actions to restore the balance (Cooper et al., 2001; Lazarus, 1966). Work stressors are identified at the level of the job (e.g. workload), the team (e.g. social climate) and the organization (e.g. leadership styles) (Salin & Hoel, 2011; Samnani & Singh, 2012). We focus on those stressors that have been examined most frequently in previous studies, and were demonstrated to be linked with being a target of workplace bullying. Second, we will also focus on person-related factors. Previous research on the antecedents of bullying have mainly focused on personality traits, such as neuroticism (Glasø, Matthiesen, Nielsen, & Einarsen, 2007), conscientiousness (Lind, Glasø, Pallesen, & Einarsen, 2009) and extraversion (Persson et al., 2009). However, the findings of these studies seem to be inconsistent and conflicting (Samnani & Singh, 2015). Therefore, in this study, we include a person-related factor that is of particular relevance when dealing with stressors, namely employees' coping strategies (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping strategies refer to employees' tendency to make cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage, tolerate or reduce – thus control – work-related stressors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping strategies can either be directed at tackling the problem ('problem-focused coping') or at managing emotions associated with the stressor ('emotion-focused coping') (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). We aim to identify problem- and emotion-focused coping strategies that moderate the association between work stressors and workplace bullying. Third, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) state that coping resources play an important role in one's tendency to conduct a certain coping strategy. Therefore, we aim to include coping resources – defined as "the resources which a person draws on in order to cope" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 158) – in our comprehensive model. Coping resources, such as social skills and positive beliefs, may impact on the tendency to conduct a coping strategy (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984): drawing on coping resources, the employee evaluates his/her possibility to control the situation, which influences the tendency to conduct a certain coping strategy (Jerusalem, 1993; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). While coping resources refer to individual factors that are available to employees when evaluating their coping repertoires, coping strategies represent concrete efforts to manage the stressful situation (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). By focusing on both coping resources and coping strategies, prevention area's can be identified for future intervention research on workplace bullying (Vartia & Leka, 2011). As such, our third aim is to identify coping resources that are associated to the tendency to select beneficial coping strategies with respect to being a target of workplace bullying.

2. Method

This systematic review (Liberati et al., 2009) includes studies published between 1984 and 2014: this period covers an important stream of coping research (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and includes workplace bullying research at its onset (Leymann, 1996). The studies were