

WORKPLACE CYBERBULLYING

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the lack of literature on cyber bullying in the workplace and to develop research propositions for further development based on several existing streams of research related to bullying, aggression, and decision-making. The constructs of trait anger, narcissism, approval of aggression, job dissatisfaction, and the demographic construct of gender are posited as areas for future research.

BULLYING IN THE WORKPLACE

Workplace bullying is slowly gaining the attention of companies and academic researchers. In part, this recognition is due to the negative consequences to organizations such as absenteeism and employee turnover (Raynor and Hoel, 1997). Li (2007) defines workplace bullying as a form of aggression. This aggression may include both verbal and physical harassment. Li (2007) further notes bullies intentionally inflict injury or discomfort and includes hitting, pushing, hostile gesturing, threatening humiliating, degrading, teasing, name calling, put downs, sarcasm, taunting, staring, silent treatment manipulating friendship and ostracizing.

Workplace bullying is more prevalent than many think. In a 1997 study by Raynor and Cooper, 53% of respondents reported being bullied. However, official reported incidences are much lower. Why? The reason may be that a stigma exists against reporting in an official manner (Raynor and Hoel 1997). This stigma is partially explained by Namie (2010) who suggests several possible interrelated explanations. One explanation is low reporting is due to cultural bias against appearing weak. A second possibility is the economic conditions in which employees find themselves where people feel lucky just to have job and may be embarrassed/ashamed to complain about work issues. Further, to expose being bullied at work requires independence, pride, and self-assurance as suggested by Namie (2010) which are the very psychological constructs most damaged in bullying!

Organizations should care about bullying among their employees. Workplace bullying impacts victims, but also impacts witnesses (Namie, 2010). Bullying therefore has a greater impact for organizations including impact on morale, culture, and productivity beyond the aggressor-aggrieved dyad.

Literature Review

There is very little academic research in the area of cyber bullying in the workplace. However, the work done demonstrates the practice is not trivial. In a study of workplace bullying, 40% of union workers experienced bullying, 10% of those 40% experienced cyber-bullying. Of those who experienced cyber bullying at work, 100% also experienced face-to-face bullying (Privitera and Campbell, 2009). The increase in cyber bullying in the workplace should not be a surprise since the adolescents who grew up with the practice are entering the workforce and bringing their norms and behaviors with them. In addition, those that bully face-to-face certainly have no compunction taking a less direct tact. Furthermore, no work environment is safe from cyber bullying including academe (Gupta, 2008).

There is increased attention on cyber bullying in the workplace in the popular press which highlights what cyber bullying practices are and ways to avoid them (Duram, 2010; Jensen, 2011). These articles also highlight corporate risks which include litigation for the company. Currently, 21 states are debating laws that make workplace bullying an unlawful practice (<http://www.healthyworkplacebill.org>). These

regulations extend beyond current US laws addressing hostile work environments.

The impact of cyber bullying at work is noted by Privitera and Campbell (2009) on several levels. The immediate impact on the individual is diminished physical health and well being. Further personal relationships and self esteem are impacted. These in turn affect future career advancements and long-term or recurring sick leave.

To date, research on cyber bullying in the workplace has been descriptive and focuses on describing the actions and consequences. The following sections provide a more theoretically based series of propositions to explore cyber-bullying in the workplace as well as its underlying causes. The constructs of trait anger, narcissism, approval of aggression, behavioral ethics, job dissatisfaction, interpersonal conflict, and the demographic construct of gender are presented as possible areas for a robust more theoretically grounded stream of research to pursue in explaining the underlying roots of cyber bullying in the workplace. The first construct explored is trait anger.

Propositions

Trait anger -Trait anger refers to an individual's anger proneness as a personality trait (Deffenbacher, 1992). Persons with high trait anger have higher predispositions to respond in a hostile manner and perceive situations as frustrating (Herscovits, Turner, Barling, Arnold, Dupre, Inness, LeBlanc, and Sivanathan, 2007). Trait anger is shown to be related to workplace aggression. Fox and Spector (1999) demonstrate a relationship between trait anger and both work frustration and work place aggression exists and is directed at both the individual and the organization. Douglas and Martinko (2001) found a strong link between workplace aggression and trait anger. The importance of trait anger (and other individual difference variables such as self-control and negative affectivity) is demonstrated by Hempworth and Towler (2004) who found these constructs to account for 27% of the variance in workplace aggression. Given the strength of the relationship between workplace aggression, future researchers should examine the relationship between trait anger and workplace cyber bullying. Thus the following research proposition:

P1: Perpetrators of workplace cyber bullying will have higher levels of trait anger than non-perpetrators.

Narcissism - Narcissism is a multidimensional construct and includes a sense of grandiosity and superiority, a sense of entitlement, exploitation of others for personal gain, lack of empathy for others, and an excessive need for admiration from others (Ang, Ong, Lim and Lim, 2009). Lubit (2004) notes narcissistic managers devalue others, feel exempt from normal rules of society, lack empathy and have little, if any, conscience. Narcissism is related to relational aggression in adolescents, which can carry over into adulthood (Kerig and Stellwagen, 2010). Narcissism is shown to be related to aggression specifically in the form of a reprisal. Ang, et al. (2009) note greater aggressive behavior is directed at the person or persons who were perceived to have insulted them. Further, in the workplace, if a negative evaluation or provocation is perceived as threatening, it is likely that narcissists will perceive bullying behavior as legitimate and justifiable (Ang, et al., 2009). Challenges to a narcissist's grandiose self-image can lead to a rage that is destructive to themselves and their victims. Thus, even constructive feedback can result in inappropriate retaliation that harms both parties (Lubit, 2004) leading to the following proposition:

P2: Narcissism is positively related to cyber bullying behavior. **Approval of Aggression** - Normative beliefs are shown to influence behavioral intentions and behaviors, see research on the theory of planned behavior or the theory of reasoned action for examples. Normative approval of aggression is a construct that is shown to be directly related to aggressive behaviors and to mediate the relationship between other constructs that are positively related to aggression. Research indicates that children and adolescents who approve of the use of aggression are

considered more aggressive by their parents, teachers, and peers than individuals who do not approve of the use of aggression (Ang, et al., 2009).

Huesmann and Guerra (1997) longitudinally studied normative beliefs that are supportive of aggression and eventually aggressive, bullying behavior resulted. Their results indicate that normative beliefs become stable by fourth and fifth grade and, once stable, these beliefs predict aggressive, bullying behavior through adolescence and beyond. In a similar finding, Bellmore, Witkow, Graham, and Juvonen (2005) demonstrate that adolescents who believe in the appropriateness of aggression chose hostile/aggressive response options that result in subsequent physical, verbal, and indirect bullying behavior. Thus, the following proposition:

P3: Approval of aggression is positively related to cyber bullying in the workplace. Gender - As an individual difference, gender is related to aggression.

Some studies indicate that men are more aggressive than women (McFarlin, Fals-Stewart, Major, and Justice, 2001; Green, 1990). However, in specific situations, women can be more aggressive than men (Namie and Namie, 2000). In the instance of cyber-bullying, females are more likely to be both the victim and perpetrator (Tokunaga, 2010). Gender differences also exist in who is doing the bullying at work. Men are more likely to be bullied by their superiors, while women are just as likely to be bullied by a superior or their peer (Salin, 2005). For women, workplace bullying affects their beliefs about the world, people, and themselves. Additionally, women have greater symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder than males (Rodríguez-Muñoz, Moreno-Jiménez, Sanz Vergel, and Hernández, 2011). Within the acts of cyber-bullying, gender differences also exist. In males, gender visual cues can be considered good indicators of severe cyber bullies and cyber victims (Menesini, Nocentini, & Calussi, 2011). The impact of workplace bullying is also different based on gender. Researchers should examine the relationship between gender and workplace cyber-bullying.

P4: Gender and cyber bullying in the workplace are positively related.

P5: Gender plays a mediating or moderating role in cyber bullying in the workplace.

Job Dissatisfaction - Job dissatisfaction is a function of how much people dislike their job (Spector, 1997). Several studies have linked job dissatisfaction and frustration to bullying behavior at work. Stress is shown to increase job dissatisfaction and to lower aggression thresholds for the concerned individuals—partly due to the fact it does not allow for time-consuming conflict solving (Salin, 2005). For example, bullying may result from inefficient coping with frustration (Baillien, Neyens, De Witte, and De Cuyper, 2009). Einarsen, Rannes, and Matthiessen (1994) and Vartia (1996) found a significant correlation between bullying and low satisfaction with the social climate at work. Dissatisfied employees are more likely to act in destructive ways and act out through workplace aggression (Herscovits, et al., 2007). This aggression may be an effort to assert or regain some level of control over their job (Judge, Scott, and Ilies, 2006). Interestingly, Rodríguez-Muñoz, et al., (2009) demonstrate that bullying may also be a cause (and not a result) of job dissatisfaction. Thus, the following research propositions are suggested:

P6: Job dissatisfaction will be positively related to cyber bullying in the workplace.

P7: Job dissatisfaction may be both a cause and result of cyber bullying in the workplace.

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