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Individual and situational predictors of workplace bullying: Why do perpetrators engage in the bullying of others?

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Stressful working environments are often assumed to create conditions that may lead to bullying. However, few studies have investigated how factors experienced in the work environment may trigger perpetrators to engage in bullying of others. Drawing on Spector and Fox's (2005) stressor–emotion model of counterproductive work behaviour, the present study investigated the predictive effects of both individual and situational factors as predictors of being a perpetrator of workplace bullying, as applied to a representative sample of the Norwegian workforce ($N = 2359$). Results from logistic regression analysis show that being oneself a target of bullying, regardless of the frequency, and being male strongly predicted involvement in bullying of others. Among the situational factors, only role conflict and interpersonal conflicts significantly predicted being a perpetrator of bullying. The present findings support the notion that bullying will thrive in stressful working environments and thus yield an important contribution in identifying antecedent conditions to counteract the development of bullying at workplaces.

Keywords: bullying; harassment; aggression; job stress; perpetrator

Introduction

Stressful working environments have long been assumed to create conditions that may lead to the development of bullying at work (Leymann, 1996). Although the reasons for why bullying develops at workplaces may be many and interwoven, and be related to characteristics of both the targeted individual and the perpetrator, prevailing explanations emphasize the importance of problematic organizational and work-related conditions as underlying factors in this process (cf. Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003; Leymann, 1996). A growing body of research during the last couple of decades has shown a range of work-related factors to be related to exposure to workplace bullying, while considerably less attention has been devoted seeking to explain why perpetrators engage in bullying. The present study aims to address this gap in workplace bullying research by investigating individual and situational factors that may encourage individuals to become perpetrators of bullying at work. After reviewing the relatively limited empirical knowledge that exists on perpetrators of workplace bullying, we will investigate the effects of the situational factors decision authority, role ambiguity, role conflict and interpersonal conflicts as predictors of engaging in bullying of others, drawing on the

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stressor–emotion model of counterproductive work behaviour as a theoretical backdrop (Spector & Fox, 2005). Their predictive effects will be investigated after also taking into account the effects of four individual factors, namely target status, gender, hierarchical position and age.

The phenomenon of workplace bullying refers to a gradually evolving process, whereby an individual ends up in an inferior position and becomes the target of systematic negative social acts by one or more perpetrators (Brodsky, 1976). Workplace bullying consists of repeated and prolonged exposure to predominantly psychological mistreatment, directed at a target who is typically teased, badgered and insulted, and who perceives himself or herself as not having the opportunity to retaliate in kind (Einarsen et al., 2003). Workplace bullying can take the form of direct acts, such as verbal abuse, accusations and public humiliation, but it can also be of a more subtle and indirect nature in the form of gossiping, rumour spreading and social exclusion (Einarsen, Hoel, & Notelaers, 2009). However, when frequently and persistently directed at the same individual, even such subtle and indirect behaviour can be experienced as an extreme source of social stress at work (Zapf, 1999). Exposure to workplace bullying has repeatedly been shown to have detrimental consequences for affected individuals and to have wide-ranging negative consequences for organizations at large (cf. Aquino & Thau, 2009; Bowling & Beehr, 2006).

Several explanations have been put forward to account for why individuals engage in bullying of others at work. Engaging as a perpetrator of workplace bullying has been proposed to be a consequence of oneself being exposed to bullying and as a problem-focused coping strategy in defending oneself against further acts of mistreatment (cf. Aquino & Thau, 2009; Lee & Brotheridge, 2006). Others have proposed that bullying develops as a result of lack of social competencies and as a result of micro-political behaviour within organizations, and further as a self-regulatory process with regard to protection of ones self-esteem (see Zapf & Einarsen, 2003 for a comprehensive discussion). However, although Zapf and Einarsen argue that individual and personality factors on the part of the perpetrator probably do play a role in the development of workplace bullying, they strongly argue against one-sided and mono-causal explanations. Explanations for why such behaviour takes place within workplaces will probably be too simplistic without also taking into account work-related and organizational factors. In this sense, the stressor–emotion model of counterproductive work behaviour may prove useful (cf. Spector & Fox, 2005).

According to the stressor–emotion model, stressors experienced in the work environment may induce negative emotions in some individuals, which, in turn, may lead them to engage in aggressive behaviour towards others. Processes leading up to aggressive behaviour are further related both to individual characteristics and to whether the individual perceives him or herself to be in control of the situation inducing the experience of stress and negative emotions. While several studies have shown a range of work-related factors to be related to being exposed to workplace bullying (see e.g. Hauge, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2007 for a review), few studies have so far explored how such factors may relate to being a perpetrator of bullying. Still, reviewing studies relating to counterproductive work behaviour, Spector and Fox (2005) identified experienced role ambiguity, role conflict and interpersonal conflicts as important precipitating conditions for engaging in aggressive behaviour targeted

towards other individuals in the organization, thus corresponding to work-related factors that are normally found as strong correlates of exposure to workplace bullying (cf. Bowling & Beehr, 2006).

Due to difficulties in collecting and obtaining valid and reliable information, existing empirical knowledge on perpetrators and perpetrator characteristics is scarce and has mainly been obtained from self-reports of targets of bullying, while less evidence has been presented reflecting self-reports from perpetrators themselves (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2007; Zapf & Einarsen, 2003). Yet, the existing evidence shows perpetrators to be males more often than females (e.g. De Cuyper, Baillien, & De Witte, 2009; Hershcovis et al., 2007; Rayner, 1997), and to be supervisors and managers more often than subordinates (e.g. Hoel, Cooper, & Faragher, 2001), although Scandinavian studies in general report approximately equal numbers of perpetrators among supervisors and subordinates (cf. Zapf, Einarsen, Hoel, & Vartia, 2003). Engaging in aggressive behaviour is also frequently associated with age. It is assumed that with increasing age, individuals better understand the consequences of their behaviour and that they therefore are more likely to exert control over their anger (Barling, Dupré, & Kelloway, 2009). However, studies have shown mixed results in relation to age, with some studies reporting a negative relationship (e.g. De Cuyper et al., 2009; Inness, Barling, & Turner, 2005), while other studies have found no significant relationship between age and engaging in aggressive behaviour at work (e.g. Glomb & Liao, 2003).

Only a few studies have reported prevalence rates of perpetrators of bullying. In a UK study, prevalence rates varied largely from 19.3% when applying a sole self-report measure to 2.7% when applying a more stringent criterion reflecting both self- and peer-reported behaviour (Coyne, Chong, Seigne, & Randall, 2003). None of the perpetrators in the UK study reported being both a target and a perpetrator of bullying. In a Norwegian study, Matthiesen and Einarsen (2007) found perpetrators to yield a total prevalence of 7.5%. In addition to non-involved individuals, they further distinguished between respondents who were perpetrators only, and perpetrators who were both perpetrators and targets of bullying, constituting 5.4% and 2.1% of the sample, respectively. This latter group of targets, who also engage in bullying of others, has been characterized by a combination of both anxious and aggressive reaction patterns. Their behaviour may cause irritation and tension in their surroundings, and corresponds to that of those who, in school research, have been labelled provocative victims or bully/targets (cf. Olweus, 2003). Matthiesen and Einarsen (2007) showed that the bully/target group reported significantly lower levels of self-esteem and higher levels of role stress than did both the perpetrator only group and non-involved individuals. Moreover, Hauge and colleagues (2007) showed bully/targets to report significantly lower levels of job satisfaction and higher levels of job stress than did non-involved individuals. However, applying a strict criterion for significance, no significant differences were identified between the perpetrator-only group and non-involved individuals.

Based on the relatively limited systematic knowledge that exists on perpetrators of bullying, the present study will investigate both individual and situational factors as predictors for engaging in bullying of others. Although some evidence has been provided for why individuals engage in aggressive behaviour at work, drawing conclusions based on zero-order correlations may capitalize on chance and potentially lead to erroneous conclusions (cf. Barling et al., 2009). Drawing on

situational factors that previously have been found to be of importance in relation to a stressor–emotion framework (cf. Spector & Fox, 2005), the predictive effects of decision authority, role ambiguity, role conflict and interpersonal conflicts will be investigated applying a multivariate design. In line with the existing empirical knowledge, the predictive effects of these situational factors will be investigated after also taking into account the effects of the individual factors target status, gender, hierarchical position and age.

Method

Sample and procedure

This study constitutes an extension and reanalysis of data as employed by Hauge and colleagues in a previous study (2007). The study sample is based on a representative sample of the Norwegian workforce, collected through anonymous self-report questionnaires by Statistics Norway (SSB). A total of 2539 questionnaires were returned, yielding a response rate of 56.4%. To be able to retain as many respondents as possible for the analyses and to avoid loss of power, responses with minor number of missing values were imputed by the EM algorithm in SPSS, yielding a sample of 2359 cases to be analysed. Thus, some minor differences existed as compared to the overlapping results presented by Hauge et al. (2007). Males yielded 48.5% of the analysed sample, with 19.8% reporting to be supervisors. Mean age was 43.7 years.

As previous studies have identified the individual factors target status, gender, hierarchical position and age as possible important factors in relation to being a perpetrator of bullying, the effects of these variables were taken into account in the analyses. The situational factors investigated in the present study refer to decision authority, role ambiguity, role conflict and interpersonal conflicts (cf. Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970; van Veldhoven & Meijman, 1994). To measure perpetration of workplace bullying, respondents were asked to indicate if they themselves had exposed others to bullying at their workplace during the last six months. Response categories were "no," "yes, to some extent" and "yes, to a large extent," where the last two categories were combined to avoid too small groups for the analyses. Exposure to workplace bullying was measured by a self-labelling measure, whereby respondents were asked to indicate whether they considered themselves to have been exposed to bullying at work during the last six months. Response categories were "no," "rarely," "now and then," "once a week" and "several times a week."

Both exposure to and perpetration of workplace bullying were measured according to the following definition: "Bullying takes place when one or more persons systematically and over time feel that they have been subjected to negative treatment on the part of one or more persons, in a situation in which the person(s) exposed to the treatment have difficulty in defending themselves against it. It is not bullying when two equally strong opponents are in conflict with each other" (for a full description of the measurement instruments applied, see Hauge et al., 2007).

Analyses

To obtain zero-order correlations between the study variables, Pearson's product moment correlations were computed. For the correlational analysis, exposure to workplace bullying was analysed as a binary variable (i.e. "no" and "yes"). To

predict being a perpetrator of workplace bullying, logistic regression analysis was conducted. Only variables correlating significantly with being a perpetrator of bullying were included in the regression analysis. The predictor variable exposure to workplace bullying was recoded into two dummy variables for the regression analysis, reflecting being exposed to bullying occasionally (i.e. "rarely" and "now and then") and on a weekly basis (i.e. "once a week" and "several times a week"), with no exposure to bullying as the reference group. The odds ratio obtained from the logistic regression analysis is to be interpreted as the likelihood of being a perpetrator of workplace bullying with an increase in a predictor variable by one unit (cf. Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007).

Results and discussion

Perpetrators yielded 2.9% of the sample, with 1.9% being perpetrators only while a further 1% of the perpetrators reported also being bullied themselves. The prevalence rate found in the present sample is thus somewhat lower than what has been reported in previous studies reporting prevalence rates on perpetrators of bullying. Furthermore, results from the correlational analysis revealed moderate-to-weak associations between being a perpetrator and most of the study variables. The relative substantial correlation between being a perpetrator and being a target of bullying (r .27) indicates a reasonable degree of overlap between the two, and thus demonstrates the importance of taking into account target status when predicting perpetration of bullying (cf. Glomb & Liao, 2003). Except for target status, only role conflict and interpersonal conflicts showed relationships of any particular magnitude with being a perpetrator of bullying (Table 1). In line with what has been found in previous Scandinavian studies (cf. Zapf et al., 2003), no significant differences were found with regard to hierarchical position of perpetrators (χ^2 0.03; df 1). In addition, the assumption that age is related to engaging in aggressive behaviour was not supported in the present study. Hierarchical position and age were thus left out of the following regression analysis.

The results from the logistic regression analysis showed target status to be the most important predictor of being a perpetrator of workplace bullying. Being exposed to bullying occasionally (OR 9.38) and on a weekly basis (OR 11.11), both proved to be strong predictors of being a perpetrator, as compared to not being exposed to bullying. The findings also show an increasing probability of being a perpetrator with intensified frequency of exposure to bullying. In line with previous findings (cf. Zapf et al., 2003), males were found to have a significantly higher probability of being a perpetrator of bullying as compared to women (OR 2.09). Among the situational factors, however, only role conflict (OR 1.37) and interpersonal conflicts (OR 1.26) were able to significantly predict being a perpetrator of bullying, although rather weakly (Table 2). Neither decision authority nor role ambiguity was able to predict being a perpetrator of workplace bullying in the present sample when taking into account the effects of the other variables.

The large overlap between being a target and being a perpetrator of bullying highlights the need to institute preventive measures against bullying at workplaces. Regardless of the frequency of the bullying exposure, individuals who were being exposed to bullying both occasionally and on a weekly basis all showed a substantial propensity to engage as perpetrators of bullying. Perceptions of unfair treatment

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations.

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Bullying[a] (Perpetrator)	0.03	–	–								
2. Bullying[a] (Target)	0.05	–	.27**	–							
3. Gender[b]	0.49	–	.06**	.01 ^{ns}	–						
4. Hierarchical position[c]	0.20	–	.01 ^{ns}	−.02 ^{ns}	.12**	–					
5. Age	43.66	11.32	−.03 ^{ns}	.01 ^{ns}	.01 ^{ns}	.07**	–				
6. Decision authority	2.70	0.57	−.07**	−.16**	.12**	.29**	.04 ^{ns}	(.84)			
7. Role ambiguity	2.17	0.92	.06**	.14**	.03 ^{ns}	−.07**	−.09**	−.30**	(.85)		
8. Role conflict	3.12	1.29	.12**	.19**	.06**	.07**	−.08**	−.27**	.35**	(.83)	
9. Interpersonal conflicts	1.30	0.49	.16**	.29**	.01 ^{ns}	.02 ^{ns}	−.07**	−.20**	.28**	.38**	(.75)

Note: [a] coded 0 (No), 1 (Yes); [b] coded 0 (Female), 1 (Male); [c] coded 0 (Subordinate), 1 (Supervisor); Cronbach's α coefficients are presented on the diagonal in parentheses. **$p < .01$; ^{ns} = non-significant.

Table 2. Results of logistic regression analysis.

| Independent variables | *Dependent variable: Bullying (Perpetrator)* | | | | 95% CI for OR | |
	B	*SE*	Wald test	Odds ratio	Lower CI	Upper CI
1. Bullied (Occasionally)	2.24	0.33	45.67	9.38**	4.90	17.94
2. Bullied (Weekly)	2.41	0.68	12.57	11.11**	2.94	42.02
3. Gender	0.74	0.27	7.23	2.09**	1.22	3.57
4. Decision authority	−0.03	0.14	0.05	0.97 [ns]	0.74	1.28
5. Role ambiguity	−0.05	0.13	0.16	0.95 [ns]	0.74	1.22
6. Role conflict	0.32	0.14	4.81	1.37*	1.03	1.82
7. Interpersonal conflicts	0.23	0.11	4.14	1.26*	1.01	1.56

Note: *p <.05; **p <.01;[ns] =non-significant.

have previously been found to be an important antecedent for engaging in aggressive behaviour at work (cf. Lee & Brotheridge, 2006; Neuman & Baron, 2003). As being exposed to bullying is likely to be perceived as unfair by most individuals, there exists a possibility that individuals will respond in kind to the type of treatment they receive, thus becoming perpetrators of bullying. Such a line of thinking is also in accordance with frameworks describing a spiralling effect from relative mild forms of uncivil behaviour into increasingly more intense and aggressive behaviour (cf. Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Zapf & Gross, 2001). Although a cross-sectional design cannot determine whether being a perpetrator is a consequence of being a target of bullying or vice versa, the fact that one-third of targets at one point or another also engages in bullying of others indicates an escalating work environment problem in which an increasing number of individuals take the role of perpetrator or target as time goes by. Not to forget the severe individual consequences of such exposure, there is no doubt that organizations should be interested in terminating such processes at an early stage, regardless of their causes.

The findings further indicate that situational factors relating to role conflict and interpersonal conflicts at work can instigate tension and frustration in individuals, which, in turn, may be projected onto others in the work environment (cf. Tedeschi & Felson, 1994; Thylefors, 1987). Although these are relatively modest contributions, identifying that being a perpetrator of bullying is significantly related to both exposure to bullying and experienced stress at work indicates that preventive measures should be implemented. These should involve a focus on both improving the overall work environment to avoid individual stress resulting in the bullying of others, but also on actively managing cases of bullying that may occur. However, interventions are not likely to be effective by solely focusing on rehabilitation of targets of bullying and on general work environment improvements. Active steps in preventing individuals engaging in bullying of others must also be taken. Findings from research on school bullying may prove such direct action to be the most effective way to proceed in reducing bullying at work (cf. Olweus, 2003). Organizations are likely to benefit from developing and implementing sound anti-bullying policies and practices and taking active steps to prevent interaction among individuals from escalating into bullying behaviour (cf. Einarsen & Hoel, 2008). Workplace bullying will only be able to develop within the organizational contexts that allow such behaviour to take place (Brodsky, 1976).

Limitations

Although this study has demonstrated relationships between individual and situational factors as predictors of engaging in bullying of others in a large and representative sample, some limitations need to be considered. Relying solely on self-report methodology is always problematic and probably especially so with regard to self-report of being a perpetrator of bullying due to the detrimental nature of such behaviour. Although anonymity is ensured, there exists a significant possibility that individuals will underreport engagement in such behaviour. Such underreporting may attenuate correlations between bullying and other variables because some individuals will be less honest in their reporting than others and thus introduce error in the observed relationships (cf. Spector & Fox, 2005). Triangulation with other sources of information such as peer-reported behaviour may prove useful in reducing possible mono-method bias.

Moreover, although rather weak relationships between the situational factors and being a perpetrator of bullying were identified in the present study, thus suggesting possible ignorable associations between the factors of interest, one should keep in mind the strength of relationships obtained from self-labelling single-item measures as compared to multiple-item behavioural checklists in reflecting different kinds of behaviours to assess engagement in bullying behaviour. In the case of exposure to workplace bullying, correlations between situational factors and behavioural multiple-item measures aimed at capturing workplace bullying are normally of a considerably stronger nature than are correlations with self-labelling measures (cf. Hauge et al., 2007). Thus, it is likely that the strength of observed relationships would be of a non-ignorable nature if multiple-item measures were applied, as is typically the case in studies of counterproductive behaviour towards other individuals at work (cf. Spector & Fox, 2005).

Conclusions

To summarize, we believe that the findings of this study make an important contribution to research on workplace bullying in identifying factors of importance for being a perpetrator of bullying at work. Research into this field will probably gain considerably from bridging the gap that has existed between perpetrator and target-oriented approaches towards bullying and other related constructs. It is likely that a sound and thorough integration of these approaches will provide valuable knowledge in attempting to successfully eliminate bullying from workplaces.

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