REVIEW ARTICLE

WORKPLACE BULLYING: TIME TO UNDERSTAND ITS ROOTS

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ABSTRACT

Workplace bullying has drawn greater attention in the last one and half decades. Despite its recognition by many organizations and countries, it is still rife. Why is that so? Could it be that the root of the problem has not been addressed? Or, could it be due to difficulties and resistances in embarking preventive and control measures. In this paper, we will examine the possible causes of workplace bullying based on a proposed model. In depth discussion of the personal and organizational factors are made while the work group and societal factors are dealt with in brief. In summary, the root of workplace bullying is multi-factorial. Understanding the complexity and subtlety of workplace bullying is pertinent in the effort to prevent or curtail it.

Key words: Workplace bullying, The roots of the problem in Health Care System.

INTRODUCTION

Workplace bullying has drawn greater attention in the last one and half decades. It has been recognized as an intriguing workplace phenomenon in a large number of countries worldwide. Many recent workplace surveys have demonstrated an escalation of cases.

A survey conducted on 1110 employee of National Health Services of United Kingdom (NHS, UK) reported that 38% of the employees reported experiencing one or more types of bullying in the previous year and 42% had witnessed the bullying of others. Fairly similar rate was found among the junior doctors [1]. In separate study conducted in United Kingdom, it was found that many managers were victims of bullying [2]. Workplace bullying is rife [3]. The figure however, is most likely an underestimate of the true situation

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as many are too scared to report the bullies and some act of bullying are actually not fully realized by the recipients. Bullying may take place under the disguise of performance management and reinforcing managerial control [4].

Workplace bullying is defined as offensive, intimidating, malicious, insulting or humiliating behavior, abuse of power or authority which attempts to undermine an individual or group of employees and which may accuse them to suffer stress [4]. Various terminologies have been used to describe workplace bullying. The term bullying is used predominantly by researchers from UK and Ireland, Australia and Northern Europe whereas 'mobbing' is the preferred term by researchers from New Zealand and Germany. Other terms used are 'workplace aggression', 'employee abuse', 'victimization' and workplace incivility among others. In this paper, literatures of all the aforementioned terms are reviewed though there are some differences in their exact meanings but to a varying extent, there is overlap in meaning. In fact, definition of terminology has been a research issue.

It is of great concern that many researchers have reported alarming consequences of workplace bullying, both individual and organizational consequences. Individual

consequences include depression, suicide, anxiety, cardiovascular diseases, psychosomatic symptoms and so on. As for the organization, bullying has been found to be associated with lower job satisfaction, lower productivity, higher absenteeism, higher turnover rate, and decreased commitment [5, 6]. Workplace bullying is therefore, an issue of critical importance. Effective strategies should be drafted and implemented to dampen this problem if not curbing it.

However, in order to do that, it is of utmost importance to identify and comprehend the various causes of the problem, failing which, any attempt of resolving or remedying the problem would be hampered. To date, many quantitative and case studies, and a restricted number of qualitative studies have been conducted. Unfortunately, the studies mainly focus on the type of bullying, incidence or prevalence and the consequences of bullying. Furthermore, most of the studies were conducted from the perspectives of victim or potential victims. There are not many studies addressing the causal factors of bullying. However, from the available literature, workplace bullying, especially in health care sector, is deemed very complex and a multi-factorial causal model is proposed [6, 7, 8].

Causes of Workplace Bullying

This paper will discuss the causes of workplace bullying based on the modified Zapf's model (see Figure 1).
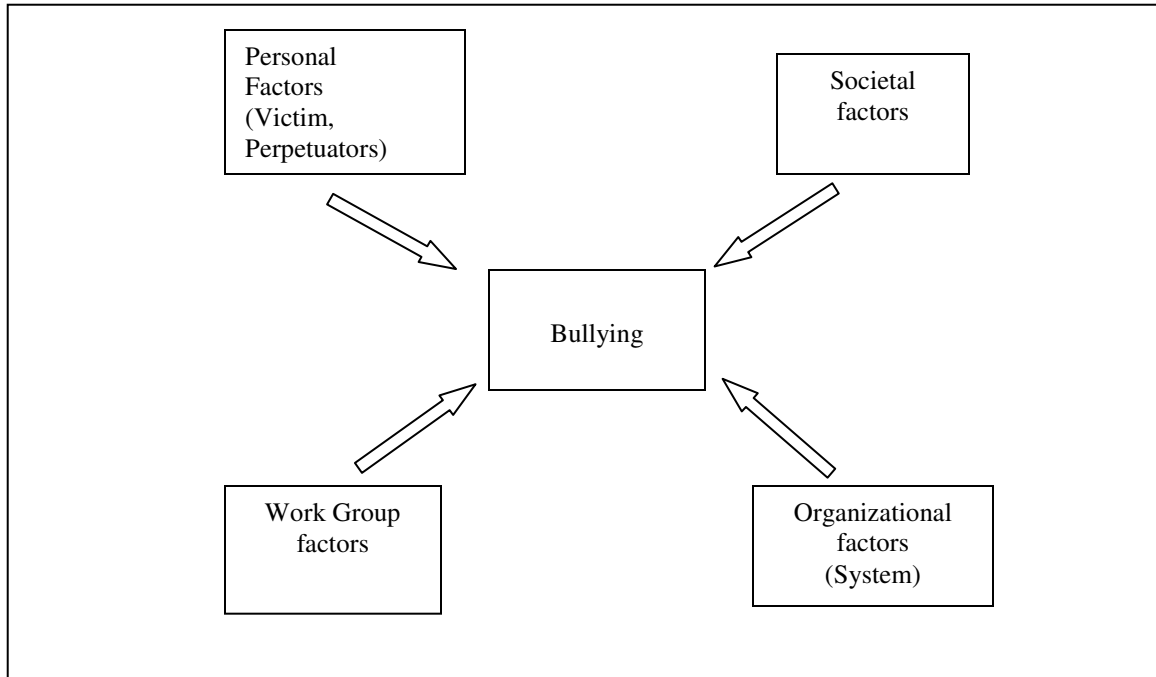

Figure 1: Model of causal factors for workplace bullying
(modified Zapf's model)

a. Personal Factors

Many case studies and media reports have regarded personal factors of either the victim or the perpetuators as the main culprit in the occurrence of workplace bullying. Such view has even been supported by many physician and clinical psychologists who attend and treat the victims of bully. Many believe that the symptoms presented by the victim could not have originated from the work experience or the outcome of bullying, instead they think that the 'neurotic' and 'anxiety' symptoms are inherent problems of the victims. In other words, the personality of victims actually provokes aggression in others. Another undeniable aspect is the widely recognized predisposing behavior of the perpetuators. Both the personal factors of the victim and perpetuators are discussed in greater length.

Victim

A number of personal attributes have been shown to predispose an individual to bullying. These encompass both the negative and positive attributes as depicted in the four situations in Figure 2. Negative attributes found to have significant correlation with workplace bullying are timidity, low self-esteem, low self efficacy or self confidence, unassertiveness and submissiveness [10, 11]. Such attributes belittle ones' ability to resist any hostile encounter instead serve as the fertile ground or entry point for any act of bully (situation1, Figure 2).
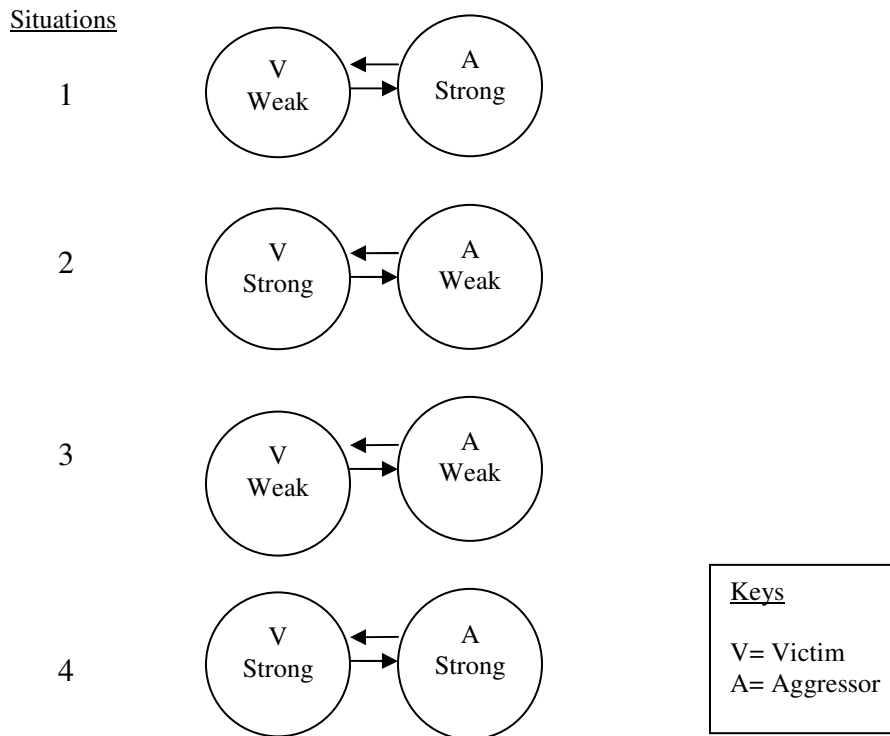

Figure 2: Different combination of personality/attributes of victim and aggressor (Adapted from Luzio-Lockett's)

It has also been demonstrated that people with low unassertiveness had the worst conflict resolution behavior with regards to all strategy (avoiding, compromising, integrating and obliging) except dominating. This implies that poor interpersonal and conflict resolution skills prone one to being bullied. In addition, it was noted in the same study that the victims have lower performance and they regarded bodily handicap and nationality as contributing causes. Those who like to show off are also at risk. People who lack constructive leadership skills, lack possibilities to monitor and control their own work and with conflicting goals and priorities are also prone to being bullied [8,12]. It is also perceived that some victims possess the desire to be victimized. They gain satisfaction through repeating acts of bullying. In other words, they cope with their anxiety through fear. This is believed to trace back to certain childhood experiences.

However, some positive attributes such as high self-confidence and/or self-efficacy, have also been identified as provokers of aggressive behavior. This is particularly so in the situation where the perpetuator has weaker attributes and lower capabilities as compared to the victims (situation 2, Figure 2). Bullying has been utilized as a strategy to foster the position of the perpetuators and ensure that the weaknesses of the perpetuators do not surface; a self-defense mechanism [13]. In some occasions, it serves to encourage self-resignation or alternative employment seeking of the victims [14].

Nationality and gender are also predisposing factors of workplace bullying. Higher prevalence of bullying was found among Asians and Blacks as compared to Whites in the study among junior doctor in the NHS [1]. A similar study also found females more vulnerable. Consistent findings are also demonstrated in other studies [15].

Perpetuator

Many studies have established that perpetuators' personality was identified as a leading factor contributing to bullying. Some perpetuators have a split personality and ingenious and kind in public but vindictive in private. Many are dominant in nature, power cravers and high ego whereas others are insecure and have poor self confidence as described earlier in Figure 2. Aggression is perceived as a means to one's personal ego-gratification. The power craving behavior or desire to make others subservient to one-self may be attributed to certain childhood experiences. It has also been postulated that childhood experiences have a definite impact on the behavior of perpetuators. Experiences of being bullied or attacked during childhood period could result in the child adopting aggressive behavior as a form of self-defense particularly if it is home violent. Such behavior is rewarded then. Hence, after entering into adulthood, they adopt the same behavior at work, believing that it will resolve complex problems that arise in interpersonal and team relationships. Another situation is the child was brought up in an autocratic environment where aggression has been displayed and consequently modeled on and laid the foundation for the child's belief on aggression.

The founder of UK National Workplace Bullying Advice Line, Mr Field described the manager who bullied him as 'social psychopath'. Whereas, Hadyn Olsen, the development manager of the Workplace Against Violent in Employment in New Zealand described 'bully as those who possess certain personality trait such as arrogance, self-deceit, coercive, emotional dysfunction'. The arrogant fellow tends to belittle others, and is indifferent whereas the self-deceit is described to possess characteristics such as unfairness, changeableness, inconsistent and unclear boundaries. Those with emotional problem have the propensity to blame others and misinterpret the intention of others. As for the coercive type, they like to impose their vision on others and then use threat to gain commitment from others. They are all prone to abuse their power.

Approximately 62% of the respondents claimed that the single perpetuator is the cause of workplace bullying [7]. It was concurrently explained by the author that the cause could still lie primarily in the social system, with a specific person seen as a ringleader. It was pointed out that according to the attribution theory, people tend to make personal attributions. That is they prefer to put the blame on people rather than themselves or the non-human factors.

According to the Social Identity Theory, one will strive to gain a positive social identity and membership of a group contributes to this. In the event where this fails or when the group one identify with compares unfavorably with other groups, one's self esteem will be lowered. This has

the repercussion on the group, manifesting in the form of abusive behavior to own members in one's endeavor to dissociate from the group and re-align oneself with another more prestigious group [16].

Interpersonal Conflict

There are occasions where unresolved interpersonal conflicts can lead to heated anger, envy which translated into bullying at work. Interpersonal conflict can be in the form of a conflict of personal interest and values, perceptions, personality, management approaches and threat to status. This may occur to pairs with any combination of personalities but the likelihood is higher when both parties have fairly equally 'strong' or hardy personalities (situation 4 in Figure 2); high personal ego and self esteem. They can be from either the same or different level of command in the organization. It can also result from a lack of communication and tolerance, poor communication skill, lack of trust, poor teamwork skill; individualist rather than collectivist, and different socio-cultural and experiential background.

b.   Organizational Factors

Many authors have argued that organizational factor is an important cause of workplace bullying [17, 18]. The victims regarded organizational factors as the most frequent cause for bullying. Some of the commonly described organizational factors are organizational change, organizational culture, organizational support, leadership problems, work organization and work stress. Many of the organizational factors are due to power imbalance, one of the enabling factor or fertile ground for the deviant behavior.

Organizational Culture

Many of the bullying goes unnoticed because it is a cultural practice of the organization. A study on the fire brigade in the UK found that bullying is endemic and deeply entrenched in the culture of the organization. The brigade is rank structured and power based. Management is authoritative and very hierarchical and the recruit system is single tier where everybody must go through the lowest ranking group upon joining the organization. Bullying has been adopted as one of the tactic of

getting things done and is perceived by some employees that the management condone such behavior. Many non-bullies actually learnt and adopted such behavior as it is valued and influential. The author presented the possibility that such behavior was a subconscious reminiscence of the managers' past as a possible explanation of the managers' acceptance of such behavior. Similar finding of organizational culture as a contributing factor to the act of bullying is found in other studies [19].

Workplace Changes

Work place changes include organizational changes, pay-cuts, budget cuts, job sharing and social changes that can have impact on the behavior of employees. The study on a wide ranging of workers from various sectors, including public and private sector demonstrated that organizational changes, job insecurity, social changes and cost-cutting are significantly associated with workplace bullying in the form of obstructionism and verbal abuse though the association were moderate. Social changes refer to changes in the social environment of the organization such as increase diversity and new affirmative action policies. Job insecurity will result if there are situation that threaten the full time nature of the job such as increase part-time workers.

Organizational change has been equated with catastrophes by some authors [20, 21]. Organizational change may come in the form of downsizing, restructuring, privatization, amalgamation, outsourcing of certain responsibilities, technological changes, changes to employment contract and reorganization of department. It is more often than not accompanied with traumatic experiences of managers and employees. It may bring about a sense of insecurity and loss of control and anxiety and stress resulting partly from mal-adaptation psychologically and emotionally to the changes [22]. Stress of change is a reality [23]. Abusive behavior may surface as a consequence especially in those adversely affected or with poor stress coping mechanism or with personality predisposition.

The abusers could be the victim of the change or the instigator or initiator of change. Such behavior may not be recognized by the initiators or some of them genuinely have no intention to induce such a traumatic experience in those

affected. Unfortunately, often time a proper cost-benefit analysis of such actions on personnel is not conducted or being ignored. The benefits of the organization take priority even at the expense of the employees. Therefore, the anger, frustration and disappointment of those affected are undeniable. Such sentiment is easily thrown upon their colleagues or subordinates, a means of outlet of anguish. In other words, others become the scapegoat because the source of frustration is either indefinable, inaccessible or too powerful or respected to be attacked.

Organizational Support

From various surveys conducted, organizational support was found as an enabler to the bullies. This implies the existence of counter norms in the organization. The ethical climate is running in contrary to the widely accepted norm. It has been argued that it takes three to perpetuate any aggression; the organization besides the aggressor and the victim. Again, in the UNISON report, approximately 94% of the respondents agree and strongly agreed that 'bullies can get away with it'. Without direct or indirect support from higher authorities, the bullies will not be able to persist in their deviant act.

The organization is perceived to confer unbridled power on the bullies and therefore, reinforcing the disruptive behavior. Management that directly advocates abusive behavior, for example, a common practice of the top management, to provide direct support to the perpetuators. Indirect support comes in the form of lack of remedial actions for complaint of bullying, lack of dispute resolution or effective employee grievances process, lack of other preventive measures for such act and lack of organizational policy to prohibit such actions. Another term of direct support rests in an existing reward system which is purely performance based or encourages the 'bottom-line mentality'. The bottom-line mentality depicts the situation where one strives to achieve an objective by all means disregards the approaches used, be it right or wrong. Under such situation, bullying may be masked or practiced under the name of enhancing performance. The reward has turned into a motivator for bullying behavior.

Leadership

It has been widely reported that most bullies are supervisors or managers. Leaders who are authoritative, with poor respect and tolerance for the employees are considered as factors contributing to bullying [24]. A survey done by Chartered Management Institute, UK has found out that only six out of ten managers believed respect for their employees, colleagues was not demonstrated in their organization. Cruel, unfair managers and managers who find bald pleasure of exercising power are also big culprit (Gates 2004).

Lack of management skills was cited as the top reason (66%) for bullying in the recent CMI survey in among UK executives, whereas 58% regarded management style as a cause. Similar finding was reported in another survey among the higher education trade union members in the Wales (UK) [19]. The respondents in the study pointed out that the two most prominent contributory causes to bullying were a lack of professionally trained middle and senior managers and a power imbalance between managers and lecturers. In addition, weak leader who are afraid of confrontation with problem and persistently keep a blind eye on existing workplace bullying will be perceived as supporting such behavior by the perpetuator. The lack of conflict resolution skill and interpersonal skill will further reinforce it.

Work Organization & Work Stress

One of the inevitable results of prolonged work stress is frustration and at times anger. Such frustration and anger will often end up in abusive behavior [25]. Today, in a competitive market environment, high workload with high performance and efficiency are the order of the day. There is only an expected escalation of work stress rather than the reverse. Coping mechanism of stress is often neglected or assumed. In the presence of other potential reinforcing factors such as personality, work group pressure, leadership problems as discussed earlier, the stress culminates and is ready to explode in the form of bullying in the presence of any triggering factors. Role conflict, role ambiguity, perceived lack of control and lack of decision latitude will further exacerbate the stress [26].

Work organization may facilitate a potential aggressor to bully his colleague or subordinates. The aggressor may be placed with or

transferred, re-allocated to a group with potential victims or be in the same group with the one he dislikes or envy. The hierarchical nature of work organization also has the potential to breed bully because of greater power imbalance and higher possibility of lack of understanding of the frontline workers' working condition by the higher management. Unrealistic organizational goals, for example, too high a performance requirement, may be set. These are often disguised forms of bullying.

c. Work Group Factors

In an organization where the function is very much dependent on group cohesion and teamwork, members of the group will be under pressure to conform to the norm of the group. For instance, in the fire brigade (UK), high regard is placed on the acceptance by the group and group membership. Therefore, if bullying is a norm or tradition of the group in order to maintain status and rank order as found in many study, the victims will have to endure and even learn the act. According to social learning theory, deviant role model will significantly influence others in the group. Any non-conformance to the group's behavioral norm will subject oneself to been bullied. In the same study, there is even the attitude that recognized complaining about the bullying behavior as disloyal. Therefore, the 'betrayal' will stand the chance of further bullying, such as social isolation from the group. It was proven that some degree of support for aggression is a significant predictor of aggression [27].

One particular way of men's and women's experiences of workplace bullying were gendered in character had been drawn out. Non-complaint to the expected gender norm or 'appropriate' gender conduct of the group was shown to be the cause of bullying [15].

A competitive work place will also generate aggressive behavior. Intense internal work competition may invoke feelings of envy and jealousy and therefore may give rise to a hostile climate. Envy is widely recognized as a culprit of abusive behavior. The sense of insecurity that experienced by some may compound the problem further. The unfairness in promotion practices also often creates anger and envy. However, in the study by Kennedy and others, surprisingly, procedural injustice was not a significant predictor of aggression.

d. Societal Factors

Role of societal factors as antecedents of work place bullying is still much under-researched. However, anecdotal experience tells us that workplace behavior is inseparable from the general life and daily events experienced by any individual as behavior is influenced by a wide ranging factor in life either internal and external, or immediate or non-immediate in nature. Non-work life stressors such as physical illnesses, family dysfunction, relationship problems, racial oppression can contribute tremendously to one's behavior at work. Any frustration, anger from home may be vented at work, turning one into a bully. Scapegoating becomes an issue.

On the other hand, any oppression or violence experienced at home may make one vulnerable to bullying at work due to low self-esteem, emotional instability among others [28]. Just as lack of organizational policy to stop bullying behavior serves as enabling factor for such action, the lack of national legislation on workplace bullying also has similar effect. Owing to that, as one of the strategic approaches to reduce the prevalence of such events, many countries have sought to enact legislation on workplace bullying.

CONCLUSION

Workplace bullying is becoming an increasingly worrying phenomenon. Many organizations including health system have acknowledged the existence of the problems but there are yet many others which throw a blind eye to the problems. Those who responded have drafted various preventive and administrative strategies but unfortunately, the efforts are hindered by a lack of evidence-based research on the causal factors. Most of the existing studies are prevalence and incidence studies. Despite that, from the available studies including incidence studies, we can appreciate that the cause of workplace bullying is multi-factorial in nature, ranging from personal factors, organizational factors to societal factors. It is therefore imperative for any preventive measure to embody a comprehensive number of identified and potential causes of bullying. A thorough investigation and analysis of the problem is pertinent and will ensure the success of the planned preventive strategies.

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