Continuities into the workplace: What can we learn from research into workplace bullying?

Dr Iain Coyne, School of Business and Economics, Loughborough University

Before debating the workplace bullying research, I wish to extend my congratulations to the authors and editors for providing a comprehensive, stimulating and informative volume. The scope of the discussion into school bullying covering conceptualisation, through consequences and antecedents, to interventions is impressive. I am also particularly pleased to observe that the volume encompasses a wide range of aggressive behaviours within a school context including homophobic bullying (Rivers), sexual violence (Lee), religious bullying (Tenenbaum, Aznar & Ruck) and hate crimes (Aziz). Advantageously, the volume promotes a multi-cultural perspective from leading experts in school bullying research.

Given the quality of this volume and the extensive research in school bullying, it is a little daunting to compose a commentary on how such research can learn from the workplace bullying literature. To focus the commentary; rather than trying to address all debates presented, this discussion will examine the workplace bullying literature as it pertains to conceptualising and researching bullying, fairness and attributions in bullying and the role of the bystander. Where appropriate within these areas the embryonic research on workplace cyberbullying will also be considered.

Conceptualising and researching bullying

In this section I wish to focus on two specific issues (see Coyne, 2016 for deliberation on how conceptualisations of workplace bullying relate to school bullying). Firstly, it is interesting to note that school bullying definitions continue to include the notion of intent (Cowie & Myers). By contrast, workplace bullying has shied away from adopting this criterion because of the difficulty in measuring intent (Einarsen et al., 2011) and the notions that perpetrators may disguise their true intentions to rationalise their behaviour to others (Samnani, et al., 2013) or deny it was negatively intended (Rayner & Cooper, 2006). The problem of including intent is perhaps more clearly evidenced in workplace cyberbullying. Technology-based negative acts may be ambiguous or often leave a trail. As a result, perpetrators may be more adept at careful in disguising cyberbullying behaviours (Coyne et al., 2016). Perhaps whether or how intent is included in definitions need to be reconsidered.

Secondly, the adoption of an inclusive stance on types of school bullying seen in this volume is something to be applauded. The workplace bullying literature is awash with different 'types' of interpersonal negative workplace behaviour, each professing defining characteristics highlighting their conceptual differentiation from each other. However, scholars are advocating a higher-level/superordinate conceptualisation of bullying (e.g. Lutgen-Sandvik et al, 2007) where specific defining features (e.g. intention) are viewed as contextual factors or moderators in a causal path between aggression and outcomes (Coyne and Monks, 2011; Hershcovis, 2011). Similar to Myers (this volume) workplace bullying and other forms of harassment may be differentiated legally. There is currently no UK workplace bullying law, although certain aggressive acts could be dealt with under the Equality Act (2010), health and safety legislation and the other non-school specific acts detailed by Myers. Nonetheless, a legal/non-legal criterion should not be the defining criterion used to distinguish different forms of interpersonal negative behaviour. Overall, by adopting a superordinate conceptualisation, organisations can highlight clearly that all forms of aggression are unacceptable, rather than trying to shoehorn negative acts into academic-led definitional criteria.

Understanding workplace bullying

Contrary to the school bullying literature, albeit adopting predominantly a victim perspective, workplace bullying research has tended to focus less on the actual protagonists and more on promoting the work environment such as poor leadership (Hoel et al, 2010), job demands (Salin, 2015) role ambiguity (Notelaers et al, 2010) and organisational change (Harvey et al., 2006) as the dominant explanation for bullying behaviour. Perhaps the extensive literature here can help school-bullying researchers better understand the environmental factors which promote bullying behaviours.

The role of victim disposition in bullying is controversial with some authors (Aquino et al., 1999; Coyne et al., 2000) suggesting personality may explain the submissive or provocative nature of bullying victims (this links closely to resilience outlined by Cefai and Sims-Schouten & Edwards this volume); while others have posited personality as an outcome rather than an antecedent of bullying (Leymann, 1996). Similar to Cowie and Colliety (this volume) scholars have suggested workplace bullies possess an inflated self-esteem and ego-defence mechanism (Zapf & Einarsen, 2011), although there are a dearth of empirical studies of narcissism and bullying.

Pörhölä highlights the need to pay more attention to the social relationships between perpetrators and victims. Extending the dispositional hypothesis of both victims and perpetrators, Aquino and Lamertz (2004) may offer some insights here. They propose a dyadic model of victim and perpetrator interaction outlining the types of bullying which result from an interaction between submissive and provocative victims and domineering and reactive perpetrators:

- Dominating perpetrator – submissive victim = predatory bullying where the perpetrator controls an 'easy target' victim.
- Dominating perpetrator – provocative victim = dispute-related bullying resulting from the need to dominate being met by resistance.
- Reactive perpetrator – provocative victim = dispute-related bullying emerging from perceived provocation from a victim (e.g. ego defence).
- Reactive perpetrator – submissive victim = no/little bullying.

Fairness and attributions in workplace bullying

Discussions around fairness and attributions are prominent throughout in this volume. Theoretically, justice (Parzefall & Salin, 2010) and attribution models (Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Hershcovis, 2011) have been applied to help explain the process and/or outcomes of workplace bullying. While models do not agree fully on the order of each construct in predictive pathways, fairness and attributions are predicted to impact employee work behaviour and well-being. Interestingly, within workplace cyberbullying (Farley et al, 2015) findings have indicated different predictions depending on attributions of blame. While self-blame related to mental strain indirectly through negative affect; perpetrator blame related to job dissatisfaction indirectly through justice perceptions. These ideas and findings may be helpful in understanding the processes underlying school bullying.

Bystanders

Hanif and Zaheer and Pörhölä suggest the need to further consider participant roles within school bullying. In comparison, understanding participant roles or bystander behaviour in the context of workplace bullying is relatively unexplored to date (Paull et al. 2012) - even though bystanders are the largest group negatively affected by workplace bullying. Conversely, examining cyberbullying at work, Coyne et al., (2016) reported non-significant

relationships between witnessing workplace cyberbullying and witness mental strain. These authors suggest: "the online nature to cyberbullying may reduce the likelihood of a witness experiencing social bonds with the victim, potentially reducing their empathic responding" (p.27).

Leading from the discussion of attributions, Bloch (2012) posits witnesses of workplace bullying create blame attributions based on a moral schema of the behaviour. As a result, three participant roles (not unlike school-based bullying) emerge:

- Defender – a bystander perceives the victim's actions as within and the perpetrator actions as outside workplace norms.
- Prosecutor – the victim is characterised as to blame for the bullying because his/her behaviour is outside of workplace norms.
- Commuter – the bystander fluctuates between sympathising with the victim and viewing the victim as deviant.

Empirical evidence on these roles within work bullying contexts is very sparse. Some recent research I have been involved in adopting a quasi-experimental vignette design has illustrated bystanders were least likely to adopt a defender role and more likely to agree with perpetrator actions when bullying was online and work-related. One hypothesis for this result is the potential for online/work-related acts to be ambiguous in nature and hence potentially not viewed as bullying by a bystander (Coyne et al, in review). This links back to the question of intent within bullying definitions.

Perhaps an area workplace bullying research may be fruitful for school bullying researchers to consider, derives from theoretical explanations of bystander behaviour. Robinson et al. (2014) detail three theories which may help explain bystander behaviour:

- Justice theory suggests witnesses who perceive a sense of moral outrage/injustice to the behaviour are compelled to act to restore the justice (e.g. defender role).
- Stress theory implies that witnesses experience secondary trauma potentially resulting in cognitive and emotional empathy with the victim's circumstances (e.g. defender role).

- Social learning theory intimates witnesses may view negative behaviour as socially acceptable, model it or perceive the behaviour does not warrant intervention (e.g. prosecutor or commuter role)

In conclusion, workplace bullying research on the impact of fairness, attributions and emotions in the bullying process could offer insights for school bullying researchers. These ideas are not only applicable to the victim perspective, but can also be applied to the perpetrator and bystander roles. Potentially, these models could help with "understanding of interaction processes in which the different participant roles are produced" (Pörhölä, page ??) and lead to evidence-based prevention and intervention strategies to reduce bullying.

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