

## **How Transformational Theory can be used to understand the Personal Experience if being Bullied in the Workplace**

**Abstract:** Bullying is a growing problem in all organizations. This paper will examine how transformational theory can be used to understand victims who are being bullied in the workplace. This research will provide useful information regarding all aspects of bullying and how it relates to this theory.

Mezirow's transformation theory occurs when someone's view point has changed because of a life changing event. In this type of learning, there is a noticeable change in the person's behaviors and perhaps their attitudes as a result of a life changing event (Clark, 1993). Using this theory, this paper defines the term bullying; looks at the types of bullying; the symptoms, individual-level antecedents, consequences and the effects; acceptance in different cultures and how transformational theory can be used to understand the personal experience if being bullied in the workplace.

### **Defining Bullying**

Bullying in the workplace has been an ongoing problem in the workplace in all societies. In today's workplace, regardless of the level of hierarchy or the type of industry, bullying is taking. Organizations are trying to find a way for not just the Human Resources department to deal with bullying, but also having every employee aware of how to handle this new phenomenon. Many persons suffer abuse from co-workers, managers and supervisors every day. Workplace bullying has been defined by several persons as early as 1990, the first being by Leymann. Leymann (1990, p. 119) describes negative workplace phenomena as:

“Mobbing,” “ganging up on someone” or psychic terror. It occurs as schisms, where the victim is subjected to a systematic stigmatizing through, inter alia, injustices (encroachment of a person's rights), which after a few years can mean that the person in question is unable to find employment in his/her specific trade.

Leymann (1990) continues to state that “psychical terror or mobbing in a working life means hostile and unethical communication which is directed in a systematic way by one or a number of persons mainly toward one individual” (p. 120). Adams (1992) described workplace bullying as a type of disease that you don't realize is there and which the side effects are not always noticeable. In some organizations, the victim of bullying may not always realize that they are being bullied. For example, in the kitchen of a restaurant, having the chef always shout at you and tell you that you are not doing a great job is a form of bullying. A classic example is the world renowned chef, Chef Gordon Ramsay. He is a fantastic chef, who is known by many around the world, but he continually shouts at his staff and belittles them in front of others; sometimes he may even engage in cursing his employees. This is seen as bullying in a 'normal' work environment but unfortunately not by him. For him, this is a way that he conducts his business and his employee turnover is in reality very low. Bullying also takes place in this situation because other employees working for the chef might be affected by his shouting and as

a result, their performance might decline due to fear of being ostracized. But as more studies were conducted, the term became more defined. The editors of *Bullying and Emotional Abuse in the Workplace* arrived at a relatively limited definition of bullying in the workplace as ‘harassing, offending, socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone’s work tasks’ (Hanfling *et al.*, 2002, p. 15). This definition lacks or is slightly limited in that it omits the aspect of the victim being psychologically impacted as well as the culture of the organization being affected. The victim would be affected as well psychologically after facing the abuse of another employee. It puts the victim in a state where they are limited in their mental capacity and are not able to function in their job and therefore their performance would be affected. (Hanfling *et al.*, 2002) describes this as a person who is feeling inferior and is now the target of negative social acts. Many authors have definitions for this term, however one definition that is commonly used is:

Bullying at work means harassing, offending, socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone’s work tasks. In order for the label bullying (or mobbing) to be applied to a particular activity, interaction or process it has to occur repeatedly and regularly (e.g. weekly) and over a period of time (e.g. about six months).

Bullying occurs when there is inadequate monitoring by management, supervisors and employees; where redress systems create dysfunction and if left unattended can have undesirable outcomes. Some examples of these outcomes occur when a report is filed and the Human Resources department deals with it very lightly trying to save each person’s job. Through this lack of attention, bullying would occur again if not fully dealt with and the person is reprimanded for their actions. Another example is the lack of attention that the managers or supervisors may have with their employees. Some managers and supervisors are not engaged with their employees and usually turn a blind eye to what is happening outside of the confinements of their office space. Because of this, they are not aware of what is happening on the other side of the walls, but once the deadlines are being met they are happy. This form of neglect is also a form of bullying even though it is not happening directly (face-to-face) to the individuals. Consequences to the person who is bullying would have to occur in order for other employees to recognize that bullying is a serious problem in the organization.

Through the definition above, four broad attributes have been extracted and are common with other definitions of the term workplace bullying. These words include: frequency, persistence, hostility, and power imbalance (Einarsen *et al.*, 2011; Monks *et al.*, 2009). The term frequency in this context refers to the consistency in which something negative occurs over a particular period of time. Researchers vary on whether the minimum number of acts must be one or two per week (Einarsen *et al.*, 2011). Persistency in this context refers to the duration of time in which the negativity occurs (Samnani & Singh, 2012). Some researchers are not in alignment of the frequency in which bullying has to take place to actually be constituted as bullying. Bullying should not be considered as an act that has to take place within five months or two years for it to be considered as bullying. Once a person is affected by negative acts by a person

or a group of persons and it is affecting their job performance, then bullying has taken place. No time limit should be placed in the definition of bullying because this act can take place twice a month and it can be such a negative act that it affects the person physically and mentally. Hostility refers to the negative acts being portrayed. Power imbalance refers to the influence or control over another person in the workplace. Coercive power refers to the control one person has over the other. This usually occurs when a person fears for his job because of intimidating remarks that a manager might make to his/her staff. The manager uses their position to instill fear in his/her employees and threatens their job if performance levels are not met.

Understanding that workplace bullying does not just occur in a top-down position is very critical. Workers in an organization can experience workplace bullying from any of their co-workers regardless of the level of management or employment. Workplace bullying consists of downwards vertical mistreatment (Tepper, 2007), which includes mistreatment that can occur: 1) from supervisor to subordinate, 2) from subordinate to supervisor, 3) between co-workers, and 4) from customers/clients to employee (Fox & Stallworth, 2005).

### **Types of Bullying**

Workplace bullying does not just include the regular common demands and threats or offensive language to a person. Bullying comes in all forms in the workplace. According to Rayner and Höel (1997) grouped workplace bullying behaviors into the following types:

- threat to professional status (e.g., belittling opinion, public professional humiliation, and accusation regarding lack of effort);
- threat to personal standing (e.g., name-calling, insults, intimidation, and devaluing with reference to age, sexual orientation etc.);
- isolation (e.g., preventing access to opportunities, physical or social isolation, and withholding of information);
- overwork (e.g., undue pressure, impossible deadlines, and unnecessary disruptions);
- destabilization (e.g., failure to give credit when due, meaningless tasks, removal of responsibility, repeated reminders of blunders, and setting up to fail).

Two other types of bullying that were not mentioned by Rayner and Höel were 'relational bullying' (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995), in which the victim's friendship networks are damaged by the bully and 'indirect bullying' (Björkqvist et al., 1994) perpetrated by a third party, such as rumor spreading. These two can be combined because when someone is being bullied and their friendship networks are broken down, it is a type of indirect bullying. For instance, in a group of five persons at work, one person is a target of bullying and the other four persons stop interacting with the victim, they are now aiding and abetting to bullying for not talking to the victim because of those rumors. Another example of indirect bullying would occur if a manager takes his department out for a celebratory dinner and excludes one member of staff in his department. This is a form of bullying because the outcome is alienating that one person from their peers. Because of this effect, relational bullying enhances indirect bullying.

### **Symptoms of Bullying**

Symptoms of bullying are warning signs that something is occurring in the workplace which results in a negative impact to the organization and that should be dealt with. Symptoms of bullying can be seen as physical and psychological. Some of these include weight gain; low self-esteem; persons always being sick; persons isolating themselves at work, even if there are

group projects and deadlines; aggressive behavior toward peers at work or even their bosses; drastic changes in weight gain or weight loss and anxiety. Some more extreme symptoms are self-destruction habits with the usage of alcohol or drugs, suicidal thoughts, violence at work, panic attacks, hypertension, and skin changes. Of course, these all differ depending on the individual.

### Antecedents, Consequences and Effects of Bullying

Some researchers have examined the antecedents but not all findings were common, however personality was the key attribute. Personality is the key to finding out who the targets and perpetrators are of bullying. Someone who is quiet and is usually a loner at work, for example the mail attendant who works in the basement of the organization who has no peers at work, may be a target of bullying. Likewise a ‘geek’ in a firm who is able to crunch numbers all day and not have any peers and who sits by himself at the table for lunch could become a target of bullying. On the other hand, someone who is a leader and who possesses the attribute of not being socially awkward may not be a target of bullying. It is easy for someone to be picked on when they are loners as opposed to not just being in a group of people, but also being confident and full of self-esteem. This is confirmed by authors in the field of research. For instance, Aquino and Lamertz (2004) and Zapf and Einarsen (2011) suggested that there are two target types: vulnerable and provocative. Therefore, we can safely assume that extraverts will more often fall under the provocative while introverts may fall within the vulnerable type (Samnani & Singh, 2012). Samnani and Singh (2012) continue to say that persons with low agreeableness are more likely to fall under the provocative type while those persons with high agreeableness will more likely fall under the vulnerable umbrella.

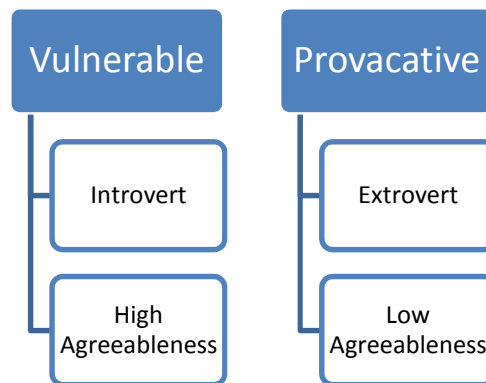


Figure 1

Consistency can be seen with Aquino and Lamertz’s (2004) study, where employees who keep to themselves and who are socially awkward are vulnerable to becoming targets of bullying. Therefore, these persons can be seen as vulnerable and can easily become targets because of lack of confidence, vulnerability, insecurities, and depression.

Not much research has been done on the consequences of bullying, however some important facts still remain. The two categories that stand out are psychological and physiological. Bullying can lead to immediate effects on the victims’ mental health as well as physical health. Researchers have found that bullying has adverse effects on physical and mental health (Hoel, Faraghe, and Cooper, 2004), depression and stress (Bjorkqvist *et al.*, 1994 ; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002), sleep problems and mood swings (Strandmark & Hallberg, 2007) and suicide (Rayner, Hoel, & Cooper, 2002). For work-related outcomes, researches have found

that bullying is associated with intent to leave (Djurkovic, McCormack, & Casimir, 2008), absenteeism (Hoel & Cooper, 2000), and job satisfaction (Lugten-Sandvik et al., 2007). In some case of indirect bullying, the group of people who are affected (as was the case above with the five friends) sometimes feel the effects of bullying. They might not be direct victims but seeing bullying take place over a period of time, might have an effect on them as well because of the negative behaviors portrayed in the workplace. They themselves might not perform effectively as well as they might not want to perform group work with the bullies. They now start to shun away from group projects and their work has now taken a negative decline.

There are also negative impacts or consequences that the organization faces when bullying takes place. The victim of workplace bullying would sometimes be absent from work or would not be able to produce effectively. Targets of workplace bullying have greater absenteeism, along with reduced job satisfaction, organizational commitment and work motivation (Agervold & Mikkelsen, 2004; Burnes & Pope, 2007; Hallberg & Strandmark, 2006; Loh, Restubog, & Zagenczyk, 2010). When this occurs, the victims of bullying might be laid off from their job or in some situations, abandon their job without any notice of leaving. This impacts not just on the victim, but also the other employees of the organization as well as the organization itself. The employees now have to fill the gap that is now present and pressure occurs in the workplace. This could put a strain on the department and also on Human Resources for not being aware of the situation that was happening in the organization. Further organizational costs include displaced effort in helping staff cope with bullying incidents and the costs associated with investigations of all treatment and potential court action (Rayner & Keashly, 2005).

Looking and comparing the symptoms to the effects of bullying in the workplace, it seems that it is a cycle whereby the symptoms can be seen as effects and the effects as symptoms. The symptoms can be mistaken for the effects, but it is not to be confused because the symptoms are the feature that are indicating a condition while the effects are the changes that are a result of an action.

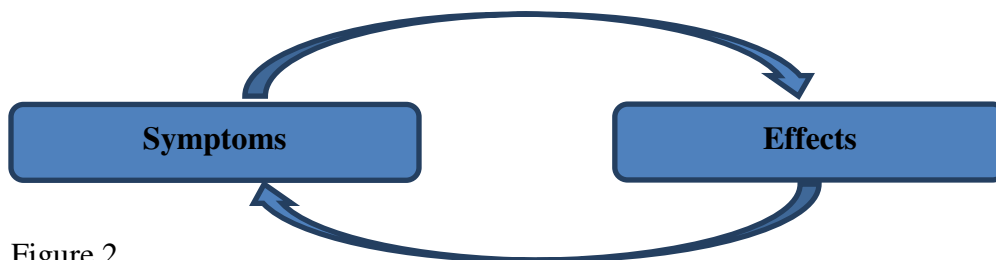


Figure 2

### Acceptance in Different Cultures

Although bullying is distressing in many cultures (Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2003), culture may influence the degree of distress experienced and the type of bullying that causes the most distress (Sidle, 2010). For example, Chinese employees seem to react more negatively to indirect conflict than American employees, and to experience more negative physical symptoms as a result (Liu, Nauta, Spector & Li, 2008). Studies in Ireland, Germany, and Austria find that victims report greater depression, irritability, and anxiety than other employees (Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2003). A professor at Tokyo Gakugei University, Shinkichi Sugimori, wrote an essay about the differences and similarities in bullying between countries. The following are his two major points on the topic:

- In the US and Europe, bullying is based on power.
- The most common form of bullying throughout the world is name-calling and teasing. In Japan, bullying often takes the form of relational aggression which involves alienating a victim from his or her peers through ostracism.

Ostracism can be seen as a form of indirect bullying by peers by exclusion. In different cultures, bullying takes on different forms but how the Human Resources department deals with it, should always be consistent. Regardless if in some countries there is a more serious impact than others, everyone should be aware of dealing with bullying.

### **Using Transformational Theory to Understand Bullying in the Workplace**

Transformational theory exists when a life changing event has occurred in someone's life, altering the way and perspective of that person's mind-frame. Being bullied is considered as life changing because of the extent of damage it has caused that person mentally and physically. For instance, some persons might seek psychological assistance from professionals in the field, while some others might fall into a deep depression. The majority of persons, according to the studies, have had negative effects after being bullied. So far, all the evidence in previous research to the effects and the victim's way of thinking suggests that there is a negative outcome.

Aligning the effects of bullying in the workplace to transformational theory, it is evident that the victims are impacted in a negative way. These life changing events do not usually lead to the victims having a positive outlook on life. Some of the victims perform poorly at their workplace; their attention span is lessened; they sometimes turn to substance abuse; and some have suicidal thoughts or might look at committing homicide just to name a few.

Transformational theory for these victims occur because of a reaction to a stimulus. In some instances, these victims do not usually speak about their experiences and they try to stay engaged in the toxic environment. In these situations, the victims and the company suffer because of the lack of attention and detail that are included in their job. In essence, transformational theory occurs because the victim has now changed his/her way of thinking for economic reasons. However, while at work, they contribute less than what is expected; they are not engaged and they participate less. Workplace bullying is becoming a serious dilemma in organizations, and unless championed by the Human Resources Department and supported by the established framework of the organization, there will be continued failure in reducing the incidences of bullying.

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