

Addressing Workplace Bullying: Promoting Employee Wellbeing Through Effective Coping Strategies

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Abstract

In the world of unprecedented digitalization and ruthless competition, every industry and businesses globally are vulnerable to obsolescence and disruptions; that are accounting due to evolving technology, rampant digitalization and evolving customer expectations/ requirements.

Stringent timelines, scope creeps, ever changing requirements and disruptive technologies are an inseparable element within organisations in current business landscape and have paved way for micro management, regular monitoring and performance anxieties; which leads to volatility and ultimately breeds in the concept of “Workplace bullying”.

For an organization to stay ahead of the curve and stay competitive it is important that they have high performing, motivated, engaged and agile workforce who are aligned and committed to organization’s success. In the current business context, it is critical for the organization world over to strike a balance between engaged and high performing workforce.

Through the Systematic review of the literature and studies carried out in the areas of workplace bullying, employee engagement, and coping strategies; this paper investigates the impact that the bullying at workplace can have on the wellbeing indices of an employee, within the organization It also intends to explore as to how employees leverage coping strategies to help them cope with and alleviate the demons of bullying at work.

Keywords: Coping strategies, Moderators, Employee well Being, Workplace bullying.

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Introduction:

In the world marred by Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity where rampant technological disruptions, cut throat competition and truncated digital life of a product or any technological offering is quite inevitable; it is imperative that organizations strive to stay ahead of the curve by maintaining the workforce that are efficient and engaged.

Bullying at work can have terrible effects on employees' overall well-being delimiting their capability to perform and deliver value. Branch et. al. in 2013; defined the terminology “Bullying” as the “pattern of consistent, negative treatment that is aimed at one or more individuals who are unable to protect themselves”.

In multiple research findings it has come to light that

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Bullying at work is perceived to bring unfathomable loss of psychological well-being and health among the employees who are subjected to bullying at the workplace. In that pretext, Bullying is proven to be deterrent to employee wellbeing.

Social bullying, also coined as relational aggression, is quite a recurrent & prevalent type of bullying that occurs at the workplace. This is when a person (bully) mistreats or acts in a way that harms a peer and/or their standing in the shared group.

“Relational aggression” is defined as the hurtful

“psychological & emotional” abuse that tries to destroy a coworker's friendship, feeling of inclusion in a peer group, or the social standing.

According to the body of research that includes both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies carried out by Mikkelsen et al. in 2020; the subjection to the bullying at work is linked to lower well-being with magnitude of effect, ranging between medium to strong.

Per Dawson, 2014; to gain an understanding of the “strength and type of the connection between bullying at work and the wellbeing, the researchers have resorted to the “moderation studies”, which analyses factors that traces the affiliation strength between predictor and the outcome.

The Moderation studies can help in determining boundary conditions as a field of study gains knowledge (Gardner et al., 2021). Regarding the connection between bullying at work and the wellbeing, they shed light on the circumstances in which workers are more likely to experience or are more shielded from developing difficulties with wellbeing after being subjected to bullying at work. In light of this, researchers have recommended that more attention be paid to the variables that mitigate the effects of workplace bullying (Mikkelsen et al., 2020; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018).

As per New Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (7th ed., revised 2005); the terminology “Well-being” is coined as “the condition of being content, comfortable and healthy”. Hence, in this context, worker's well-being connotes “physical, psychological and emotional health, comfort & happiness of employees”. Workers' propensity to use behavioral and cognitive techniques to control, tolerate, or stressors related to their jobs is known as coping strategies. (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984)

Coping mechanism meant to deal with bullying at workplace predominantly centre around both the Organizational and individual levels (MacIntosh, 2006).

Few researches have advocated for formulation of bullying prevention strategies at the organization level, even encompassing the development of an “anti-

bullying culture (Duffy,2009), anti-bullying policies (Sheehan et al.,2018) and an anti-bullying report mechanism (Bentley et al.,2012)”.

At the workplace, Employees don't only engage in interpersonal exchanges with the organization but the wings do expand to the interactions at coworkers/colleagues' level as well. Employees who forge social exchange relationships with the organization are more likely to perform well and exhibit positive attitudes and amicable behaviours (Hendrix et al., 1998) with a counterbalanced assessment of fairness (Morand and Merriman,2012).

Below are the key objectives of this research paper:

- Formulate a concept leveraging on review of literature /work that have been carried out in the purview of bullying at workplace and Employee well-being.
- Identify how Workplace bullying impacts employee wellbeing and how coping strategies act as the moderator of the association between workplace bullying and employee well-being.

Literature Review

Workplace bullying can be elucidated as the “situations where a person repeatedly, and over an extended duration of time, is subjected & exposed to negative acts at the workplace by their supervisors, subordinates or peers.”. (Mikkelsen and Einarsen, 2002)

The drill down analysis of the existing literature accentuates that Bullying at work is defined as a pattern of unjustified negative acts (physical, verbal, or psychological intimidation) that involve criticism and humiliation. One or more people with power use these acts to instil fear, suffering, or harm in the target; making it tough for the victims to defend themselves.

Bullying can be classified into:

- Work related
- Personal
- Physical/Threatening.

Work related Bullying:

Vivid literatures related to “work-related bullying”

accentuated a common issue that the positional power opens door for the bully to exert power over the target.

Jennifer, Cowie, & Ananiadou, 2003; highlighted that there are innumerable reflections in the literature where individuals getting tasked with heavy workloads was treated as one form of bullying. Quine, 1999; opined that refusing leave to employees was one another way of subjecting an individual to bullying.

(Vartia, 2001); further highlighted that Workload bullying was also meant to envelope in its purview, removing responsibilities and delegation of menial tasks.

Study carried out by Fox & Stallworth, 2006., briefly touched upon the fact that targeted individuals are entrusted with high workload and levied with unrealistic goals as a design to set them up to fail. Same was further elucidated by Rayner in his study that was carried out in 1997.

Personal / Psychological bullying:

Personal bullying also referred as psychological type of bullying is categorized into “Direct and Indirect” types of bullying.

Direct bullying:

Interactions between the bully and the bullied (the target). It encompasses committing acts of humiliation, deliberate degrading remarks, personal jokes, unfavourable eye contact, and constant criticism (Baillien et al., 2009).

Indirect bullying:

Interactions between the bully and others who indirectly harm the target. It includes disseminating rumours, false accusations, and lies and undermining an employee (Randle et al., 2007; Rayner, 1997; Simpson & Cohen, 2004).

Physical/Threatening bullying:

Though less prevalent, in this form of bullying, the bully resorts to use of body or an object to hurt or scare an individual. It includes but not limited to hitting,

shoving, tripping, kicking, pinching, spitting or stealing/destroying the belongings of the subjected individual.

The aspect of an employee's total well-being that is mostly influenced by their job is known as employee well-being. (Nomaguchi, Milkie, & Bianchi, 2005).

For this study, worker's well-being has been explored from the eye view of the mental health being a critical element of employee's overall well-being and work engagement accentuating employee's wellness related to the work alone.

Satcher in 2000 highlighted that “Employee well-being analyses psychological & emotional state of an individual operating at an optimum level of emotional and behavioral adjustment”.

The Employees' wellbeing concept accentuates individual's parsimonious experience & holistic quality of performance they deliver in their job (Warr, 1987). Warr, (1990) further highlighted that there were two levers to the above concept namely “Psychological well-being and job satisfaction”.

Vie et al., 2012; in their study highlighted that workforces who are bullied at the workplace tend to develop relatively more negative emotions than the employees who are not subjected to any form of bullying. While, Einarsen & Nielsen, 2015 touched upon the psychological facet highlighting that employees who are subjected to bullying tend to have an affected psychological health and are negatively influenced.

Agervold & Mikkelsen, 2004 in his study found that employees poor psychological health and bearing negative emotion have higher chance of falling sick. Their Emotional wellbeing too was perceived to take a significant hit in the study carried out by Aquino and Thau, (2009) and LeBlanc and Kelloway, (2002). Furthermore, their psychological & physical well-being dips significantly (Kitterlin et al., 2016).

According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), “Coping strategies are employees' tendency to use behavioral and cognitive strategies to control, tolerate, or manage work-related stressors”.

“Coping is defined as a set of behavioral reactions that people display in stressful situations, allowing them to adjust to their surroundings and the stressor with the primary goal of lessening discomfort”. Coping resources are personal elements that workers can consider when assessing their coping repertoires, whereas coping strategies are proactive measures to deal with stressful situations. Pearlin & Schooler, 1978).

Coping mechanisms temporarily alleviate the bad feelings associated with the stressor, but they are not sustainable in long run.

In the long run it may inhibit employees from executing a conducive action that may deem apt in addressing the problem. Emotion-driven coping strategies therefore would be an ineffective way of coping with work stressors. From vivid literatures it can be proposed: employees experiencing high levels of work stressors can leverage on combination of coping strategies ranging from avoidance, problem focussed strategies, emotion focussed strategies, strong peer networking and strong display of interpersonal skills.

In an attempt to avoid the issue, a stressed-out worker might seek out diversions and deliver their job at a comparatively lower level than their peers. Colleagues may view these standards differently and attempt to reestablish them by disciplining the employee or acting negatively toward them.

Research Methodology

This research is a conceptual study that aims to investigate based on existing literature as to how workplace bullying impacts employee well-being in an organization and how different coping strategies helps them cope with the bullying.

Conceptual paper relies more on literature than data (Gilson & Goldberg, 2015; Rana et al., 2020). Secondary data regarding the study was gathered from Google scholar, Scopus and Web of Science and Research gate.

Findings

The analysis's findings accentuated that bullying at workplace has an inimical impact on workers' psychological health. Additionally, the findings demonstrated that the relationship between psychological wellbeing and workplace bullying was moderated by psychological capital and emotional intelligence (Mensah et al., 2024).

Van Den Brande et al., (2017), examined the moderating effect of employees' emotion & problem-focused coping strategies in the strong correlation and affiliation between “exposure to workplace bullying” and “work stressors”. As anticipated, there was a strong correlation between exposure to bullying and work-related stressors and emotion-focused coping strategies. There was, however, no proof that problem-focused coping techniques had a mitigating effect on the link between bullying and work-related stressors.

According to the results, organizations should use interventions that educate staff members about the potential exacerbation of coping strategies that are focussed on emotion, while dealing with role uncertainty, employment insecurity, or role conflict.

Based on the findings, there is a buffer-effect between work induced pressure and bullying that is lessened by “reappraisal coping, confrontive coping, practical coping, direct coping, active coping, social support (problem-focused coping), and self-care (emotion-focused coping)”. This association is strengthened (i.e., the boost effect) by avoidance, recreation, social support, emotional coping, wishful thinking, and suppression (emotion-focused coping).

Van den Brande et al., 2016), in his study cited that “Coping resources (autonomy, perseverance, commitment, coworker & supervisor support, optimism, locus of control, self-efficacy, and task complexity) had a negative correlation with emotion-focused coping strategies and a positive correlation with problem-focused coping strategies”.

Hayat, A. and Afshari, L. (2020) ;basis their findings accentuated that in addition to having a direct detrimental impact on workers' wellbeing, bullying at

work also increases employee burnout, which in turn lowers worker well-being. The results validated the moderating function of perceived organizational support, demonstrating that perceived organizational support mitigates the relationship between workplace bullying and employee burnout and wellbeing.

Hsu et al., 2019; in his study found that Bullying at work had a detrimental effect on workers' wellbeing. Friendship at work and organizational justice had a major positive impact on workers' well-being. The affiliation between workplace bullying and workers' well-being was significantly moderated by organizational justice as opposed to workplace friendship.

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Analysis carried out by Farley et al., 2023 revealed that the adverse effects of bullying were continuously mitigated by organizational and social resources, such as encouraging work environments and support from coworkers. On the other hand, personal resources were not very effective as moderators.

Gupta & Bakhshi, 2018 in their Moderation analysis accentuated that "Resilience" further alleviates the detrimental effects of perceived victimization on worker well-being while accounting for the beneficial effects of bullying on victimization perception.

Bernstein & Trimm (2016); Assertiveness and asking for assistance mediated the linkage between psychological health and the bullying. In a surprising way, avoidance and inaction adequately moderated the strength of association between bullying and the psychological well-being; making the detrimental effects of bullying on psychological well-being even more pronounced.

Consequences of WPB:

The three categories of workplace bullying consequences are affective reactions, personal health consequences, and work-related consequences.

- *Affective Reactions:* The affective reactions encompassed the emotions, sentiments, and attitudes of the bullied individuals. Hansen, Hogh, Persson, Karlson, (2006) in their study conducted at the Swedish workplaces revealed that employees who were bullied had negative affect and anxiety. S'a & Fleming (2008) studied the existence of negative humour, negative mood, annoyance, nervousness, and social dysfunction among Portuguese nurses who have been bullied. Zapf (1999) documented that among German workers, bullying at work had led to increased nervousness, negative affect, and lower self-worth.
- *Individual Health Consequences:* Hoel & Cooper (2000) reckoned that the Bullying at work significantly impacts both mental & physical health. According to Mikkelsen and Einarsen's (2002) in the study of Danish manufacturing workers revealed that bullying exposure raised psychological and psychosomatic health complaints along with higher levels of negative affectivity.
- Matthiesen & Einarsen (2004) in his study carried out in Norway opined that bullying victims were found to have greater mental discomfort and PTSD symptoms. According to Tehrani's (2004) study of care workers in the United Kingdom, bullied workers had symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder.
- Hansen, Hogh, & Persson (2011) verified how exposure to bullying behaviours affected both the psychological and physical symptoms of employees in Danish workplaces. Respondents who were bullied frequently expressed lower levels of Concentration of salivary cortisol and elevated self-reported mental health symptoms, including depression, stress, and physical symptoms
- *Work-related Consequences:* Glasø & Notelaers (2012) A study conducted in Belgium brought to core that bullying at the work has a detrimental effect on organizational commitment. According to the study,

the negative emotions acted as the partial mediating factor in the relationship between workplace bullying and Organizational commitment

- Laschinger et al. (2012) According to a Canadian study of recently graduated nurses, bullying at work had a detrimental impact on the job satisfaction, which again had an adverse effect on the intention to leave.
- Glambek, Skogstad, & Einarsen (2015) A long-term study conducted in Norway found that bullying victims' self-labelling and exposure to bullying behavior were significantly correlated with changing employers.

Conclusion

Converging on the limitations and recommendation accounting from studies carried out in past, the current study is an endeavour to evaluate & analyse the importance of moderating role of coping strategies in elucidating the connection between employee well-being and workplace bullying using a moderated model. The results accentuated an inverse link between workplace bullying and employee well-being, negatively impacting workers' overall and "on-the-job" well-being.

It could be inferred that the bullying at the workplace negatively impacts Employee wellbeing. Victims exhibit extreme distress, emotional turmoil, social alienation and acute stress related symptoms that affect them physically, mentally & emotionally. Bullied employees are unproductive and exhibit high attrition rate. Organization's suffer significant financial losses on account of attrition, SLA breaches and reduced customer satisfaction that account due to victimization of employees.

Coping Strategies do play a positive role in combating the evils of bullying at the workplace. Findings accentuated that the coping strategies like Resilience, strong peer support and family support significantly mitigates the demeaning and alienating effects of bullying on the worker's wellbeing.

It could be inferred that organizations having significant traces of bullying at its workplace; had detrimental

effect on employees' physical and psychological health. The relationship between bullying and well-being appeared to be mediated by repetitive negative thinking and worrying, which was moderated by specific coping mechanisms (e.g., problem solving and ignoring the problem).

Future Scopes

While there are enough research studies that trace the impact that bullying at workplace can have on the Employee wellbeing, there are not enough literature that analyses such impact in context to Indian IT industry. In evolving economies like India which are expected to be subjected more to rampant digitalization and hence the competitive work environment, analyzing the impact of bullying on well-being would be a critical next step.

Future research can explore and investigate at length the specific mechanisms and contextual factors that mediate and moderate the above relationships, thereby yielding precise and effective coping strategies in this context.

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