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Workplace Bullying and Role of Trust and Distrust- Towards A Theoretical Framework

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Summary

This paper aims to extend the current understanding of workplace bullying by taking a trust-based approach. This paper proposes an initial theoretical framework that explains employees' behaviour in workplace bullying by outline the moderating role of trust and distrust. Drawing upon cognitive behavioural theory and organisational justice theory it proposes that an individual employee's appraisal of bullying events in the workplace can moderate their perception of organisational justice. Where perceptions of organisational justice are high, this is argued to increase employee's trust in perpetrator leading to improved employees' job-related outcomes and organisational citizen behaviour. In contrast, when an employee perceives injustice in an organisation this is likely to result into distrust in the perpetrator, leading to employee's indulging in counterproductive work behaviour. The proposed framework represents an under-researched aspect of workplace bullying research, providing support for future empirical research into the role of trust and distrust in workplace bullying outcomes.

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Introduction

Within the workplace, bullying is recognised as a salient stressor (Einarsen et al., 2011), causing serious negative consequences for employee's psychological as well as physiological well-being (Sparks, Faragher, and Cooper, 2001). Such negative impact of bullying at work highlights the need for research to develop workplace bullying prevention techniques. However, the effectiveness of such techniques depends upon the understanding of bullying as a phenomenon (Escartín, Salin, and Rodríguez-Carballeira, 2011). Yet, even after five decades of research, workplace bullying is still considered "misunderstood" (Branch, Ramsay, and Barker, 2013, p.1)

Rigotti, (2009), suggests that human behaviour depends upon several potential underlying factors and intermediate mechanisms. Further understanding of intermediary factors could extend the understanding of the phenomenon as well as human behaviour in the phenomenon. However, the primary focus of workplace bullying research is linear relationships i.e. antecedents- workplace bullying-outcomes, that provides a limited understanding of bullying at work (Rai and Agarwal, 2018). Therefore, drawing upon cognitive behavioural theory and organisational justice theory this paper develops an initial theoretical framework that starts to address this issue by incorporating the role of trust and distrust in the relationship between workplace bullying and important workplace outcomes.

We commence by discussing the conceptualisation of workplace bullying with reference to bullying intent and the perception of the victim towards it. Next, we explain a novel trust- and organisational justice-based approach to workplace bullying. In this paper we are adopting the victim's perspective to explain bullying as an unethical practice; therefore, we believe that this lens could provide the basis for the development of the theoretical framework that is discussed subsequently. We conclude with future research directions.

The Conceptualisation of Workplace Bullying: Changing directions

Since the early research in the 1970s, there has been some convergence in defining the phenomenon of workplace bullying. In his seminal work, Leymann (1996) described workplace bullying as frequent and prolonged exposure of hostile and unethical behaviour that leads a victim to a helpless situation. Einarsen et al. (2011) extended this definition Einarsen et al. (2011), describes bullying as systematic, regular (e.g. weekly) and prolonged (e.g. about six months) act of harassment that affects an individual negatively and, in the end, pushes them into an inferior and defenceless condition.

Drawing on this definition, the common feature of bullying is exposure to negative behaviour. *Duration, frequency, power difference, and systematic act* are the core features of workplace bullying that differentiate bullying from other similar concepts and makes conceptualisation of workplace bullying unique (Einarsen et al., 2011). Duration and frequency refer to the repetitive and prolonged nature of negative behaviour that reflects the intensity and long-term effect of bullying. Workplace aggression and violence are also mistreatments at the workplace, but these behaviours are not repetitive and prolonged therefore, their effects are not as severe as bullying which differentiates bullying with those terms (Jagatic and Keashly, 2003). A systematic and planned way of harassment, and power difference between perpetrator and victim explains the victim's difficulty in defending himself in bullying situation. In absence of these elements, victim would be able to confront negative behaviour that differentiates bullying from workplace conflict as in case of bullying victim ends up in an inferior situation unlike conflict.

Rayner and Keashly (2004) suggest self-labelling by victims as bullied is also an important element of bullying conceptualisation because victim's perception of bullying could increase the severity of the consequences. Appraisal of negative behaviour as bullying, results higher level of negative impact on individuals. In contrast, those who do not consider themselves as bullied in similar negative situation, remain relatively less affected (Hewett et al., 2018). On the other hand, when the victim does not consider that negative treatment as bullying, this could improve the victim's performance in similar situation. Therefore, the victim's perception of bullying acts as a crucial element for conceptualising the construct of bullying concept in order to research workplace bullying and its impact on employees.

Recent bullying research also reflects the discrepancies between the effect of objective identification of negative acts and the effect of bullying situation appraisal by the victim (Hewett et al., 2018). This emphasises the need for further research on the victim's perception in a bullying situation and that could also open the avenues to improve understanding of the victim's behaviour in bullying too.

Workplace Bullying, Organisational Justice and Trust

The previous section explains the importance of the victim's perception in conceptualising bullying at the workplace. In addition to that, the victim's perception of bullying intent and the context of mistreatment could also shape the victim's behaviour in a bullying situation (Samnani, Singh, and Ezzedeen, 2013).

Conceptualisation of bullying considers it as systematic and regular behaviour. In other words, it is a part of regular social interaction within the organisation (Jagatic and Keashly, (2003). Such interaction is interpersonal in nature (e.g. playing a mean prank on someone, spreading the rumour, losing temper) that affects the victim's perception on daily basis (Jagatic and Keashly, 2003). Furthermore, daily behaviour and social interaction could possibly alter the perception of justice in the organisation (Lind, 1997) that establishes the link between bullying and organisational justice.

Using the lens of organisational justice, the victim's perception of bullying could be argued to work in both positive and negative directions. If employees perceive regular mistreatment as hostile and unethical that could reduce their perception of organisational justice. Conversely, when employees see bullying behaviour as required by the situation, then they could consider such behaviour under the scope of organisational justice and it also may reinforce their belief in justice in the organisation (Opatow, 2000). For example, when an employee perceives that pressure for delivering more and unrealistic deadlines for work is a requirement for the survival in a highly competitive market, this perception reinforces employee's belief in organisational justice although the employee is facing mistreatment at work. Alternatively, if an employee perceives a similar kind of treatment as hostile behaviour, it is possible that this perception will lead to perceptions of injustice.

Now we consider the workplace bullying phenomenon through the lenses of trust. Mayer et al. (1995), argued that the level of interpersonal trust could be altered in case of a change in any of the three foundational constructs of trustworthiness: ability, benevolence, and integrity. In a bullying situation the victim's perception towards perpetrator's ability, benevolence, and integrity, impact upon the victim's trust in the perpetrator. In such cases, benevolence comes through the victim's perception towards the benign nature of intentions behind bullying act, integrity comes from the justification of the fairness of the bullying act based upon context and magnitude of bullying, and ability is related to victim's perception about perpetrator's competence or credibility in their role (Dietz and Den Hartog, 2006). When employees justify the bullying act on these parameters, that develops trust belief in the

perpetrator (Mayer et al., 1995). On the other hand, when victim perceives perpetrators behaviour as exploitative and threatening that reduces benevolence perception. Moreover, such behaviour is unethical, so bullying at work also alters the perception of integrity and that combinedly works as an antecedent for distrust (Guo, Lumineau, and Lewicki, 2017).

Theoretical Framework and Proposition

The proposed theoretical model is presented in Figure 1. This explains the bullying phenomenon offering a potential understanding of employee behaviour in a bullying environment through a two-stage process. The first stage is the process of appraisal of bullying in the workplace. The second is understanding of victim's behaviour in response based on their perception of the event. In this framework, we follow two different theories to explaining these two stages: *cognitive appraisal theory (CAT)* (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and *organisational justice theory (OJT)* (Greenberg, 1987).

CAT suggests, in the response of a stressful event such as workplace bullying, individual reaction depends upon their appraisal of the situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). OJT explains the relationship between the perception of justice and trust (Greenberg, 1987). Therefore, this research follows CAT in explaining the victim's perception of bullying and its appraisal, along with coping strategy in a workplace bullying situation. OJT is applied here for the explanation of the response of bullying through trust when the victim considers bullying as a reasonable act. In addition, OJT also explains the distrust behaviour when the victim perceives bullying as injustice.

In appraising the situation, employees may tend to categorise workplace stressor in form of threat, or a challenge posed by the perpetrator. Contextual factors such as intent of bullying and perception of the perpetrator may significantly affect this appraisal of the situation (Samnani, Singh and Ezzedeen, 2013). When employees perceive no malicious intent behind bullying and find it as a challenge and opportunity to develop themselves, it enforces employees believe in organisational justice and improves employees' trust in the perpetrator. In addition, because of improved trust, employees recognise organisational justice as a significant contribution from organisation and reciprocate by contributing through improved job performance and citizen behaviour (Sharkie, 2009).

Proposition 1a: Appraising bullying as a challenge enforces the perception of organisational justice.

Proposition 1b: Perceived organisational justice is likely to improve victim's job performance and organisational citizen behaviour by developing the trust in perpetrators' action.

When negative intent is perceived in bullying, such negative behaviour could be viewed as organisational injustice (Tepper, 2000). Bullying, then, could also be considered as a threat because such behaviour puts employees in a defenceless situation (Leymann, 1996). In such a situation, distrust in perpetrator could be developed through which employees tend to reciprocate perceived injustice with counterproductive work behaviour (Pillutla, Malhotra, and Murnighan, 2003). In addition, victim perceives this counterattack as their way to "fight for justice" (Zapf and Gross, 2001, p. 497).

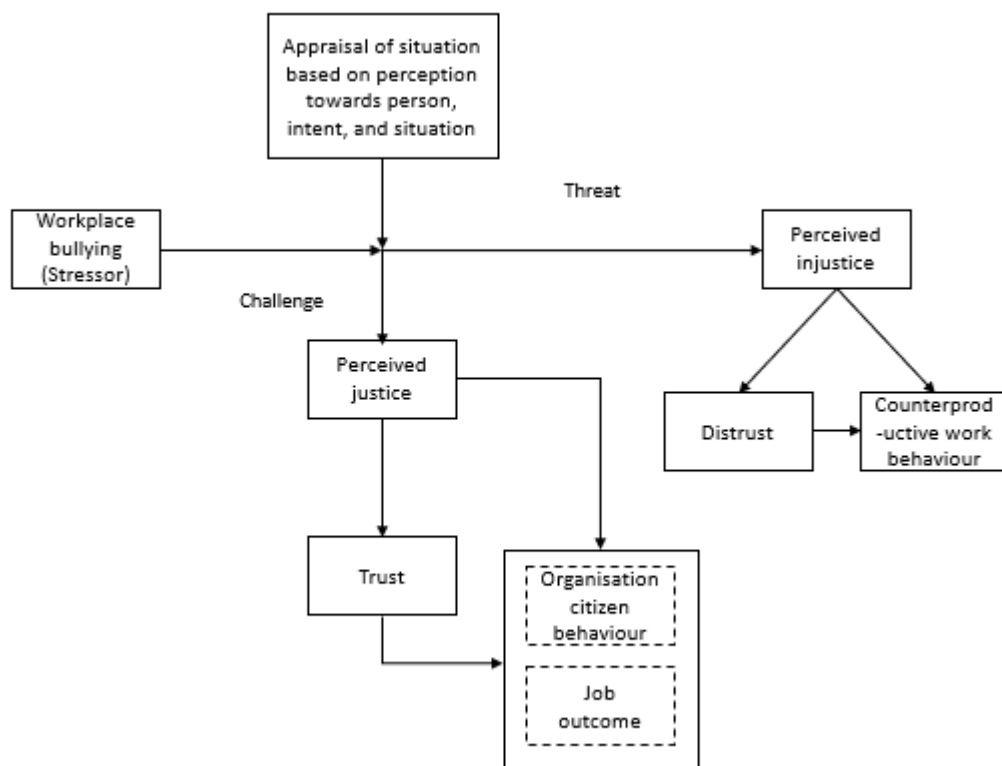


Fig. 1: Theoretical Model of Workplace bullying

Proposition 2a: Appraising bullying as a threat enforces the perception of organisational injustice.

Proposition 2b: Perceived organisational injustice is likely to develop counterproductive work behaviour through developing distrust in perpetrators' action.

Implications and Conclusion

The proposed model in this paper is an initial attempt to understand workplace bullying from a victim's perspective. This paper proposes what we believe to be a novel direction in bullying research by incorporating the role of trust and organisational justice in order to understand the mindset of the victim in bullying condition. The proposed model is driven from the theory of appraisal of the bullying situation and it tries to provide the basis for the belief that perception of the context could shape victim's behaviour in bullying as well as it could also mitigate the effect of bullying. It, therefore, aims to add on to the current understanding of bullying phenomenon for developing better interventions to prevent workplace bullying. This paper attempted to contribute to bullying literature by researching some unexplored underlying factors in this area. We believe that this model could provide a solid foundation for future research in investigating new directions in workplace bullying.

Plan for Paper Development in Future

This is a working paper and currently in the development phase. We aim to develop the theoretical model in full by the time of resubmission. A systematic literature review of bullying literature is planned for further developing the theoretical framework. Feedback and comments on the paper would provide significant help to shape this model. In addition, we

would also kindly request for feedback on specific elements of the paper e.g. additional constructs that have not been taken into consideration.

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