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Coping with the effects of bullying at work

Dr. Stephen Kodjo Kumako¹, Prof. Stavroula Leka², Dr. Aditya Jain³.

¹Department of Human Resource Management, Nottingham Trent University, UK

²Division of Psychiatry and Applied Psychology, University of Nottingham, UK

³Nottingham University Business School, University of Nottingham, UK

Abstract

Workplace bullying has been found to have adverse consequences on employees'/victims' mental health. Indeed, among a cross section of Norwegian employees, those working in environments characterised by bullying behaviours were found to be more likely to exhibit psychological distress (Einarsen & Nielsen, 2014). In this regard, the current study aimed at understanding the experience of employees with regards the how they cope with the negative effects of workplace bullying using sense-making theory (Weick, 1995). This was achieved through semi-structured interviews using employees from offshore installations as well as corporate offices in the oil and gas sector in Ghana. The sample consisted of fourteen (14) males and one (1) female.

Effects of bullying were identified at both individual and organisational levels. At the individual level, bullying behaviour has psychological, physiological and physical effects on the target as well as witnesses. The effects take such forms as general psychological distress, post-traumatic stress and panic following the experience of bullying. The individual effects then translate into consequences for the organisation in the form of lack of concentration on the job leading to mistakes and errors which may lead to accidents, poor commitment to work, and turnover intention. Additionally, thematic analysis indicated that employees engaged in recreational activities, social support and organisational policy against bullying. An interesting finding with regards to personal coping resources in the bullying situation is the role of religiosity. These findings are discussed as well as implications for the management of workplace bullying.

Introduction

Workplace bullying has been found to have adverse consequences on employees'/victims' mental health (e.g., Vega & Comer, 2005; Verkuil et al., 2015). Indeed, among a cross section of Norwegian employees, those working in environments characterised by bullying behaviours were found to be more likely to exhibit psychological distress (Einarsen & Nielsen, 2014). Similarly, Kivimaki et al. (2003) found that workplace bullying is a significant predictor of poor psychological well-being such as higher levels of depression irrespective of socio-demographic status of age, income and education. Additionally, higher anxiety levels were also found for bullied victims than the non-bullied by several researchers (e.g., Einarsen & Nielsen, 2014; Quine, 1999).

In a comprehensive model of workplace bullying by Einarsen et al. (2011), the researchers assert that the victim's ability to cope with the bullying is moderated by organisational and individual inhibitive factors as well as organisational level support systems and the personality orientation of the victim towards coping. In this regard, the current study aimed at understanding the experience of employees with regards how they cope with the negative effects of workplace bullying using sense-making theory (Weick, 1995).

Most of the published literature on workplace bullying comes from Europe and the United States of America. As such, most of what we know about the concept is based on European and American organisational settings. Following from Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions, it is possible that workplace bullying is conceptualised, perceived and experienced differently across different countries and cultures. For example, whilst 'bullying' is the preferred term used in countries like the United Kingdom, Scandinavian countries use the term 'mobbing' (Einarsen et al., 2011). These two terms although similar have unique differences in the behaviours they represent. Whilst in Scandinavian countries, mobbing is perpetrated by colleagues (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996; Leymann, 1996; Vartia & Hyyti, 2002), in the UK bullying is mostly perpetrated by employees in senior positions (Hoel et al., 2001; Rayner, 1997; UNISON, 1997). Thus, even within European countries, there seem to exist differences in the experience of this negative act at work.

Study aims

Stemming from the constructivist paradigm of constructing meaning from people's lived experiences, the current study lends itself to a theoretical framework that is very important in organisation studies but has been infrequently applied in workplace bullying research.

Weick's (1995) sense making theory highlights the interplay between action and interpretation. This perspective offers explanation about how individuals understand and construct their reality by trying to make sense of ambiguous situations they experience. They interpret the new situation and make meaning of their experiences. In a bullying situation, the persistent negative behaviours experienced by victims/targets may be very distressing and make no sense (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008). This triggers a survival mechanism to make sense of the situation to reduce the uncertainty and restore some balance. As such, this study draws on Weick's (1995) sense making theory to understand the experiences of employees in Ghana's oil and gas industry through the lenses of their lived experiences and the meanings they construct from these experiences.

Justification for population

The population for this study comprised of employees in the oil and gas sector in Ghana. These employees were drawn from offshore installations as well as corporate offices in the oil and gas sector in Ghana. This industry comprises of companies in the upstream, midstream and downstream industries. This sector is a fast-growing one since the discovery of oil and gas in Ghana in commercial quantities in 2007. It is estimated that the oil and gas industry in Ghana currently has over 7,000 employees working in various installations offshore along the Eastern, Central and Western shores of Ghana as well as in corporate offices in Accra, Takoradi and Tema. The growing number of multi-national companies in the oil and gas sector has changed the nature of work for the Ghanaian worker consistent with how offshore work operates. Whilst working in onshore operations comes with some challenges, much attention has focussed on the offshore work in this industry across the globe. Indeed, Deacon et al. (2010, p. 803) have described offshore work as "among the harshest and most stressful work environments in the world". This could be because of the physical and psychosocial stressors that are inherent in the work environment. Some of these hazards include environmental and climatic agents, hazardous production and drilling operations, noise, vessel motion, harmful chemicals, heavy physical work, cramped accommodation, lack of privacy, and isolated location (Parkes, 2012). These negative stressors may potentially have adverse implications for health and safety (Bjerkan, 2010).

Additionally, intensive work patterns and possible interpersonal conflicts including bullying may occur in the offshore environment (Nielsen et al., 2013). As such, both working onshore and offshore respectively may predispose an employee to be a victim of bullying. Consequently, understanding employees' experience of workplace bullying in the oil and gas

industry in Ghana is not only timely but necessary to help formulate and implement policies and legislation with a preventive focus. Thus, bullying may be a critical psychosocial risk in Ghana's oil and gas industry as it has serious implications for the health and well-being of the employees, the reputation and productivity of the organisation as well as the sustainability of the environment.

Sample

A sample of 15 employees was used in this study. The sample consisted of fourteen (14) males and one (1) female. The gender imbalance in the sample reflects the male-dominated nature of the oil and gas sector in the industry in Ghana. The female employee works within the corporate head offices of one of the companies and was at a middle management position. Four (4) employees were sampled from offices in Accra and Tema whilst the remaining eleven (11) were workers on offshore platforms. Three (3) of the offshore workers were working on oil rigs in the exploration of oil and gas in the Jubilee field. The remaining eight (8) offshore workers were staff on the Floating Production Storage and offloading facility (FPSO) named the 'FPSO Kwame Nkrumah'. The sample had an age range between 30 and 56 years (mean age = 44.4 years). The sample consisted of black Ghanaian workers who had varied years of experience in the industry ranging from 2 years to 25 years (mean tenure=6.9 years) in their respective professions.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were employed to collect research data. Participants were asked about their knowledge of workplace bullying. The researcher asked several questions to delve into participants' lived experiences of workplace bullying consistent with the subjective methods of measuring workplace bullying (self-labelling method without a definition; Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996). Sample questions were:

- a) Have you heard the term 'workplace bullying' before?
- b) What do you understand by the term bullying at work?

The researcher then offered a definition of workplace bullying and asked participants to assess if they have been bullied based on the definition. The definition used in this study was as follows: "*Bullying takes place when a person is repeatedly treated in a nasty or degrading way and finds it difficult to defend him or herself against the behaviour*" (Ortega, Hogh, Pejtersen, & Olsen, 2009, p. 418).

Participants were asked to self-label as a target/victim, witness/bystander or perpetrator based on the definition i.e. self-labelling method with a definition (Cowie et al., 2002). Further questions were asked participants to probe into their experience of workplace bullying such the gender and position of the bully. The interview was recorded on a tape recorder and on an MP3 player voice recorder and participants were encouraged to express themselves with as much detail and examples as needed. Interviews lasted between 27 and 45 minutes per participant. On completion of the interview, participants were debriefed.

Findings and discussion

Following from thematic analysis, two main themes were identified. These were: *effects of bullying* and *coping resources*. Effects of bullying were identified at both individual and organisational levels. At the individual level, bullying behaviour has psychological, physiological and physical effects on the target as well as witnesses. The effects take such forms as general psychological distress, post-traumatic stress and panic following the experience of bullying. The individual effects then translate into consequences for the organisation in the form of lack of concentration on the job leading to mistakes and errors which may lead to accidents, poor commitment to work, and turnover intention. Leymann (1990) described the effect of bullying as having a depleting effect on the target employee's coping resources which leads to an employee being overwhelmed with core job requirements and tasks. As such, the employee may not be able to devote maximum cognitive effort to various tasks being performed and as such may lose concentration (Gardner & Johnson, 2001; Paice & Smith, 2009). This may be tolerable in onshore settings in offices but becomes a very serious hazard in offshore installations. Here, the resulting accidents from errors of concentration may result in serious injury, loss of life and property as well as very serious consequences for the environment (Høyvik, Tharaldsen, Baste, & Moen, 2009).

Furthermore, experienced bullying at work was reported to affect target mood and attitude to work with knock-on effects on their job satisfaction, commitment and quality of life which is consistent with other studies (e.g., Hauge et al., 2007; Trepanier et al., 2013). When the bullying behaviour persists, poor work attitudes may give way to turnover intentions (Djurkovic, McCormack, & Casimir, 2008; Giga et al., 2008; Houshmand, O'Reilly, Robinson, & Wolff, 2012). However, in the Ghanaian context, employees may consider quitting their jobs but may not carry through with it. The oil and gas industry is relatively a young, high demand

and lucrative one in Ghana with good remuneration which makes finding new jobs very difficult.

Thematic analysis from this study indicate a combination of coping strategies and coping resources in dealing with the negative effects of workplace bullying. Employees engaged in recreational activities (McDougall & Drummond, 2010) and used social support to manage bullying (Cassidy et al., 2014). Additionally, organisations in the oil and gas industry in Ghana have focussed on forms of workplace violence and harassment including workplace bullying in terms of policy, procedure and arbitrating role yet workplace bullying continues to be perpetuated against employees (Woodrow & Guest, 2016).

An interesting finding with regards to personal coping resources in the bullying situation is the role of religiosity (Arnetz et al., 2013; Kutcher et al. 2010). Employees indicated the use of positive religious coping including praying about the situation, forgiveness of perpetrator, seeking support form clergy members and religious focus. This finding is consistent with the view that Ghanaians are generally very religious (Gyekye, 2003) especially in times of distress. As such, employees making sense and dealing with their bullying situation by engaging in positive religious coping may result in better mental health.

These results indicate that the psychosocial work environment in the Ghanaian oil and gas industry is stressful. Research in this sector has shown that a poor psychosocial work environment is associated with health problems and ill-being resulting from long-term exposure to psychosocial risks (Bergh, Leka & Zwetsloot, 2018). As such, psychosocial risks should be given the needed priority especially in offshore settings. In off-shore settings especially, psychosocial risks such as workplace bullying could lead to health and safety incidents and should be prioritised as other operational physical safety concerns (Bergh et al., 2014). Additionally, management must address the causes of workplace bullying to reduce its negative effect on employees.

Development plan

This is a working paper and will be developed in full in due course. Constructive and critical feedback on various aspects of the paper will help improve it further.

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