

*What's in a name? "Workplace Bullying": Perceptions of Organisational Justice and Outcome in Workplace Bullying Policies and Procedures.*

\*Moira Jenkins: School of Psychology, University of Adelaide, South Australia.

[moira.jenkins@adelaide.edu.au](mailto:moira.jenkins@adelaide.edu.au)

Professor Helen Winefield, School of Psychology, University of Adelaide, South Australia. [helen.winefield@adelaide.edu.au](mailto:helen.winefield@adelaide.edu.au)

Dr Aspa Sarris, School of Psychology, University of Adelaide, South Australia.

[aspa.sarris@adelaide.edu.au](mailto:aspa.sarris@adelaide.edu.au)

\*Principal author.

This presentation examines the results of thematic analysis undertaken from interviews with thirty workers who had identified themselves as being bullied at their work over the last year.

Most workplace bullying researchers have a readily understood framework as to what workplace bullying is (Einarsen, Hoel et al. 2003). Similarly the legal definitions of workplace bullying provide a clear definition of the phenomenon. However, the use of the term 'bullying' by affected workers might not necessarily fit into either of those definitions (McCarthy 2003), and there have been only a few studies that have examined

what sort of behaviours workers who have identified themselves as being bullied have been subjected to.

Because workplace bullying is recognized as a occupational health and safety issue most organisations now have bullying policies and complaints procedures to manage and deal with complaints of workplace bullying. However there have been no studies that have examined what behaviours have occurred to make a worker utilise these policies and complainant procedures, nor what occurs when workers utilise these processes. Similarly, despite bullying policies being cited as best practice (Dollard & Knott 2004), there have been no studies that have examined the negative consequences of workplace bullying policies.

There is an extensive body of research that has suggested that perceptions of fairness in the administration of the policy will influence how employees recover following being bullied at work. This is because employees' evaluations of organisational justice can influence their attitudes, behaviour and overall health, including psychological distress, depression and anxiety (Elovainio, Kivimaki et al. 2002; Surinen, M.Kivmaki et al. 2002; Ylipaavalniemi, Kivimaki et al. 2005), with poor perceptions of organisational justice being a risk to the health of employees. In practical terms it follows that organisations with policies and procedures that emphasise the importance of justice may obtain significant benefits in terms of increased organisational commitment from employees and less absenteeism from physical and physiological health problems. If this is placed within the context of workplace bullying grievances, a poor evaluation of organisational justice

might contribute to increased distress over and above the distress caused by the workplace bullying.

In Australia, workers are entitled to apply for workers compensation if they suffer a workplace injury. Claims for psychological injury as a result of workplace bullying and harassment cost over \$100 million dollars nationally per year, and psychological injury claims have the longest average time lost from work in comparison to workers compensation claims for other types of (non psychological) injuries (National Occupational Health and Safety Commission 2002).

The decision to lodge a workers compensation claim has been found to significantly relate to a worker's perceptions of fairness within their organisation (Roberts & Markel 2001). Other studies have found that the way the organisation responds to stressful incidents and grievances, makes a difference as to whether a workers compensation insurance claim for psychological injury is lodged following the incident (Dollard, Winefield et al. 1999).

Thirty participants recruited via a media release took part in this study. All participants had lodged internal workplace bullying complaints with their organisation over the preceding year. Participants were interviewed and the interviews transcribed. A thematic analysis was carried out in accordance with recommendations made by Braun and Clarke (2006).

A large number of different situations including one-off conflicts were labeled as 'bullying' by participants. Conflict framed as bullying put many of the participants into a more powerful position because they were able to utilise the organisation's bullying complaint procedures. Participants had little insight into how their own behaviours (including putting in a formal complaint) may have contributed to or escalated the problem.

In many instances, the framing of the conflict as 'bullying' served to negate any individual responsibility the participant may have had for the conflict, and moved participants towards a more positional based dispute (having to 'prove' they were '*bullied*'). When this occurred, it appeared that a number of participants had an expectation the organisation would support them as they had 'promised' in their bullying policy. Most participants who believed they were not being supported by the organisation saw submitting a workers compensation claim as a last resort. However, it appeared that submitting a workers compensation claim served to further alienate the worker from any support the organisation could give, as the organisation had to defend its legal liability against a bullying claim. Significant themes of revenge were also revealed during analysis and these were also born out of notions of injustice when the organisation no longer supported the bullying claim.

These results suggest that workplace-bullying policies may actually contribute to workers framing a number of different types of workplace conflicts as bullying. These findings have significant implications for early intervention in workplace conflicts in order to

prevent them being labeled as bullying by aggrieved workers. Because of this it is suggested that organisations develop and promote 'respectful behaviour' policies so that aggrieved workers do not frame all conflict within a bullying paradigm. Results also stress the importance of fairness in the administration of policies in order to prevent both the exacerbation of psychological harm and perceptions of injustice, and prevent workers claiming compensation which is a costly exercise for both the organisation and aggrieved worker.

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