Effectiveness of individual and organizational strategies to address workplace bullying

Dianne Gardner
Tim Bentley, Bevan Catley, Helena Cooper-Thomas, Mike O’Driscoll & Linda Trenberth

Research funded by the NZ Health Research Council and NZ Department of Labour (now MBIE)

Paper presented at the New Zealand Psychological Society Conference, Auckland, 7 September 2013
What is bullying?

“a situation where a person feels they have repeatedly been on the receiving end of negative actions from one or more other people, in a situation where it is difficult to defend themselves against these actions. These negative actions could be physical or non-physical (e.g. verbal abuse). A one-off incident is not defined as bullying.” (Einarsen et al., 2003)

Key features: negative, repeated, perceived, unjustified

Related concepts:

- Aggression
- Harassment
- Violence
- Incivility
- Anti-social behaviour
- ‘Mobbing’ – any different from bullying?

How assessed?

- Behavioural measures (e.g. Negative Acts Questionnaire)
- Self-labelling, with or without definition of bullying
Why is workplace bullying important?

Exposure to workplace bullying is a “more crippling and devastating problem for employees than all other kinds of work-related stress put together”

(Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf & Cooper, 2003a, p. 3)

Bullying affects ...

- Target
- Observers
- Whole organisation via increased absenteeism, turnover, decreased performance, productivity

Potential investigation costs

- time, money, public image, etc.
The research

New Zealand workers in 4 sectors – health, education, hospitality, travel

Survey of employees N=1733 (27 organisations); 78% women

Independent variables:

Bullying (Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised)

Criterion variables

Strain (GHQ-12)

Wellbeing (positive affect)
Bullying

Respondents who had experienced at least 2 negative acts at least weekly for at least 6 months:

\[ N = 308 \ (17.8\%) \]

Relatively high by international standards

These respondents are the focus of the current study.

The most frequently reported negative acts were:

(a) Having necessary information withheld
(b) Being ordered to work below one’s level of competence,
(c) Being exposed to an unmanageable workload
Compared to non-targets

Targets perceived:
  Less constructive and more laissez-faire leadership
  Less supportive supervisors and colleagues
  Less effectiveness of organisational strategies

Targets experienced:
  More stress and less wellbeing
  More intentions to leave
  Worse self-reported job performance

Targets used:
  The same amount of problem-focused coping
  More self-distraction coping
  More resigned coping
Among the targets of bullying (n=308)

Higher levels of wellbeing and less strain were associated with*:

More perceived organisational support
More perceived effectiveness of organisational strategies
More supervisor and colleague support
Less laissez-faire leadership
More constructive leadership

BUT wellbeing was not related to the use of personal coping strategies (problem-focused, distraction, acceptance)

(Overall levels of wellbeing were lower and strain was higher for targets than non-targets)

* $r$ statistic; $p<.01$
Which factors buffered the negative effects of bullying?

*Personal factors i.e. coping*

Resigned coping
  (e.g. “carried on working and pretended the problem didn’t exist”)

Selective coping
  (e.g. “told yourself that it could be much worse”)

Problem-focused coping
  (e.g. “did something to solve the problem”)

Resigned coping (avoidance)
  No

Selective coping (re-appraisal)
  No

Problem-focused coping (taking steps)
  No
What about organisational factors?

Perceived organisational support?
(7 questions e.g. “help is available from my organisation when I have a problem”)  
No

Laissez-faire leadership?
(8 questions, e.g. “fails to interfere until problems become serious”)  
No

Perceived effectiveness of organisational strategies?
(13 strategies e.g. “encouraging open and respectful communication between people”)  
Yes

Constructive leadership?
(6 questions e.g. “sets clear goals for work”)  
Yes
Personal coping strategies did not buffer the effects of bullying on wellbeing.

Constructive leadership and perceived effectiveness of organisational strategies did significantly buffer the relationship between bullying and wellbeing.
Perceived effectiveness of organisational strategies

DV: Wellbeing Beta

Negative acts -.353***
Effectiveness of org. strategies .325***
Interaction .162**

Adj. R2 = .32
F (3,273) = 43.41***
Constructive leadership

**DV: Wellbeing Beta**

Negative acts -0.351***
Constructive leadership 0.285***
Interaction 0.10*

Adj. R² = 0.26

**F (3, 273) = 36.85***
Conclusions

Bullying is often seen as an individual problem (personality clash) to be solved by those involved

BUT

better wellbeing was associated with organisational not personal factors.

Leadership is important.

Organisations need strategies that are seen to be effective.

We need more organisational ‘best practice’ case studies/ success stories.
Thank you

References and coefficients are available on request
Effectiveness of individual and organizational strategies to address workplace bullying

Gardner, DH

2013