



Individual Accounts of Workplace Bullying Incidents from Indigenous, Contextualised Perspective

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Abstract

Workplace bullying because of its complexity and the many labels and words that researchers, the media, and the public use to describe the behaviour, workplace bullying is a complex and pervasive phenomenon that has grown difficult to comprehend as an organisational phenomenon. Bullying at work is a constant possibility in settings where people engage frequently. Bullying in the workplace is now a common occurrence that, when overlooked, can lead to serious issues. This study endeavoured to identify shared themes from individual accounts of workplace bullying incidents, from an African indigenous perspective with not predominantly continuation of the work from Western countries. This empirical study was conducted in Limpopo province and grounded theory was used as a methodological strategy with twenty-one indigenous research participants selected using purposive and snowball sampling. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to generate data with the support of an interview guide. However, interviews were recorded using a cell phone recorder, transcribed, coded, and analysed using Microsoft Excel and interpreted. The findings of the study were analysed using content analysis. The findings of the study identified nine accounts of bullying behaviour. These are disrespect, rumours or bad-mouthing, name-calling, threats, unfair treatment, yelling to cause public humiliation, infringement of rights, work overload and domineering. The study recommends that anti-bullying policies can play a significant role in combating workplace bullying.

Keywords: *Workplace Bullying; Indigenous Knowledge; Accounts of Bullying Behaviour; Contract of Employment; Demonstration of Power*

Introduction

Over the years, workplace bullying has been a well-established research issue that has been studied all over the world (Botha, 2019; Sheehan, McCaben & Garavan, 2020). According to the literature, the phenomena was first investigated in school settings (Roberts, 2000; Aquino & Bradfield, 2000). "The systematic study of bullying in schools may be traced back to the 1970s, mostly in

Scandinavia," (Smith & Low, 2013: 81). Olweus (1978) conducted research on school-aged children's violent behaviour. Thus, research on bullying has mostly focused on adolescents and youngsters as targets (Espelage, Low & De la Rue, 2012; Woudstra, van Rensburg, Visser & Jordaan, 2018). Because victims can be targeted by two or more people, Heinz Leymann (a German psychiatrist) coined the term "mobbing" to describe bullying in the 1980s. Bullying can now be recognized in workplace settings, with adults as targets, and the focus has shifted over time (Misawa & Rowland, 2015; Einarsen, Skogstad, Rorvik, Lande & Nielsen, 2018). Bullying has been acknowledged as a severe problem with major implications when disregarded in the Western world since the early 1990s (Bulutlar & Khan, 2009; Houshmand, O'Reilly, Robinson, & Wolff, 2012).

Nonetheless, it appears that researchers are primarily interested in the phenomenon of workplace bullying from the perspective of Western worldviews and knowledge systems, or dominant knowledge systems in the so-called Western World. In other words, the concept "workplace bullying" is mostly understood from a "non-African" point of view and perspectives (Power, Brotheridge, Blenkinsopp, Bowes-Sperry, Bozionelos, Buzády & Madero, 2013). This does not come as a surprise, according to Jacobson, Hood, and Van Buren (2014), bullying awareness began in Sweden in the late 1960s. Heinemann (1972) coined the term "mobbing" to describe this "phenomenon." Since then, Western perspectives have shaped thoughts about what defines the concept's meaning and how to measure it. Thus, the Negative Act Questionnaire is widely used to measure workplace bullying.

In the South African culture, elders have power over the young ones, and such kind of ideology can be the case in the workplace. Furthermore, there is a saying in the South African culture that "the younger shall serve the older". What if there is no such a phenomenon in a South African context? Based on that, it can be concluded that studying individual accounts of workplace bullying incidents from an African indigenous perspective can have a positive implication in the African world of work.

Besides, Bergeron and Schneider (2005) reported that if a certain culture supports strong masculine values, they place less emphasis on interpersonal relations, and consequently, tend to display more aggressive behaviour. Furthermore, Maunder and Crafter (2018) are of the understanding that in one cultural context, actions operationally identified as bullying may not be defined in another context as bullying. Taking the above statement into consideration, when do we say someone was bullied, looking at bullying from an indigenous or African perspective? In other words, what are the individual accounts of workplace bullying incidents from an indigenous or African perspective?

Furthermore, in the South African world of work, several studies have been conducted on the phenomenon under study (De Wet & Jacobs, 2013; Botha, 2019; Smit, 2021). Nevertheless, an analysis of these studies shows that they are predominantly a continuation of the work of overseas scholars with minimal original contributions from South African knowledge perspectives. This trend may have a negative impact on the formulation of workplace bullying policies and procedures or legislation to curb bullying in diverse work contexts. This highlights a need to study workplace bullying from an African perspective, to generate grounded or grass-root (indigenous) knowledge of workplace bullying. Issues of bullying might mean different things to people from different ethnic backgrounds, this further shows a significant need to study workplace bullying from different ethnic backgrounds. Thus, the study aims to explore accounts of workplace bullying from an indigenous, contextualized South African perspective.

Research Methodology

Qualitative inquiry served the interpretation purpose of gaining indigenous insights on workplace bullying from a South African perspective. The study took place in Limpopo province, South Africa.

Because of its diversified nature, Limpopo province was chosen as the study location, with more languages spoken than any other province in South Africa. Thus, the population of this study consisted of employees from three different ethnic backgrounds in Limpopo Province (Xitsonga, Tshivenda, and Sepedi) regardless of their occupation, sector, and status. A combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling was utilized to collect the sample. Face-to-face interviews were conducted to generate data from the participants. A content analysis process was used, and themes were induced from collected data. An ethical clearance certificate was obtained from the University of Limpopo, Turfloop Ethical Clearance Committee (TREC). Confidentiality was also maintained during the data collection process.

Literature Review

Theoretical review

The underpinning theory used in this study was workplace Mezirow's transformational theory. The transformational model happens when someone's perception has changed as a result of a life-changing event or experience (Hadeed, 2014). Being a victim of bullying behaviour within the workplace may be considered a life-changing experience because of the degree of damage which bullying may have on the person emotionally or psychologically. For example, after being bullied, someone might need psychological help from a psychologist."

Thus, based on the effect that bullying behaviour might have on the victims, it is rational to comprehend the phenomenon from the transformational theory perspective. Some of the victims of workplace bullying may have significantly low job performance; their attention span may be reduced; sometimes they might turn to drugs and alcohol; and some might have suicidal thoughts (Hadeed, 2014: 6). Hadeed (2014) further states that transformational theory for these victims occurs because of a reaction to a stimulus. However, it is important to note that Mezirow's transformational theory only explains the effect of workplace bullying on the targets or victims, not the perpetrator.

Empirical

Although the idea of bullying in the workplace has been talked about for some time, as stated earlier, the first research on this negative act concentrated only at the school level (primary & secondary), focusing on children-matured kids, inside scholastic settings (Aquino & Bradfield, 2000; Olender-Russo, 2009). It has become an important phenomenon to conduct a study in the workplace because bullying behaviour is now a common phenomenon among employees and employers, and it exists at numerous levels inside the authoritative progression (Roscigno, Lopez & Hodson, 2009; Olender-Russo, 2009; Baillien et al., 2009). Regardless of one's location, bullying behaviour in the workplace presents a significant problem for individuals who are victims and associated employees as well as organisations. The reason for this is that bullying, as a real workplace experience, has an impact on employees beyond the workplace (Christianson, 2015).

Research has shown that most employees will, directly or indirectly, be exposed to bullying during their careers (Namie, 2007). In addition, bullying also has a negative impact on the organisation. It may result in increased turnover, absenteeism, and decreases in employee performance and productivity (Rayner, Hoel & Cooper 2002). Assisting employees to cope with bullying incidents, and the investigation of ill-treatment and potential court action could also be costly to organisations (Rayner & Keashly, 2005). Therefore, researchers have emphasised the need to manage workplace bullying within the organisation because it is too costly when ignored (Hannabuss, 1998; Khan & Khan, 2012).

Workplace bullying is one of the phenomena that has existed ever since human beings worked together. However, according to Davenport, Schwartz, and Elliott (2002), studies have begun to label and examine this phenomenon in the last few decades. Thus, human beings use verbal skills to express their aggression, sometimes the aggression might be physical. Thus, this aggressive behaviour may be regarded as bullying behaviour. Besides, perceptions on which types of negative behaviour could be classified as bullying behaviour and it is influenced by individuals' understanding of the phenomenon. Moreover, in early research, Pietersen (2007) stated that bullying behaviour is not openly acknowledged or displayed. Thus, this is an important feature to take into consideration when trying to understand the phenomenon.

To date, with rare exceptions (Van de Vliert et al., 2013; Power et al., 2013), workplace bullying research is fairly western-centric. Very little information is available on what constitutes bullying beyond some Western and European countries. As stated earlier, bullying behaviour have been studied vividly in the West with limited studies conducted in Africa. Nevertheless, studies have been conducted in the West, but workplace bullying was also documented in Africa (Ilongo, 2013; Adebayo & Juliet, 2014). The focus of these studies was not only on the prevalence of workplace bullying, but also on the effect on targets, bystanders, and the organisation. In South Africa, Marias-Steinman (2003) reported that labour market issues like unemployment and affirmative action have had an influence on the incidences of bullying behaviour. Studies on bullying behaviour in the South African contexts are still limited. Thus, this means that very little information is known about workplace bullying in South Africa.

Results and Discussion

The results from the interviews were analysed and presented using themes which were generated from the participants. The results show that the participants shared multiple incidents (bullying) that took place in their lives subjected by both managers and fellow colleagues, usually verbal.

Disrespect

In this study, the majority of participants (n=18) spoke about how managers disrespected them. For example, the second participant said on their accounts of bullying behaviour *"Some are treated with respect and dignity and others are not. Some of the permanent staff members are being mistreated and overloaded with work. They are also not being consulted, they are just told what to do and they must comply, especially those who can't defend themselves, while those who can defend themselves are respected"*.

In reflecting on examples of their experience of bullying behaviour, participant 17 spoke about how he was disrespected in the workplace: *"So another thing is about being disrespected. This starts from cleaners to security guards. I don't even have to say anything about the manager; he even calls himself the boss. Cleaners will shout at you in front of students. In other companies, cleaners respect staff members"*.

Rumours or bad-mouthing

Twenty (20) participants identified rumours or bad-mouthing as one of the bullying behaviours that participants were subjected to. Participant 6 said *"It got to the point whereby he went to the line manager and informed her that I was not serious about my work. So, my line manager came to me and told me that I didn't want to finish my work not knowing what was happening"*.

Participant 10 stated that *“if you did not want to be part of the group she would bully you, she would be on your case even go to the extent of talking about you even if she was not mentioning your name, just by using small things she would just get an opportunity to be on your case”*. Participant 21 also emphasized that rumours and bad-mouthing are forms of bullying by stating that *“as time went by, the people that I was close with at work started distancing themselves from me, only to find out that my co-worker is bad-mouthing me. People started building hatred against me”*.

Name-calling

Name-calling usually refers to the use of abusive language or insults to undermine a person's integrity and status. This was noted as one of the major forms of bullying behaviour identified by research participants. Participants (1, 3, 5, 8, 11, 18) in this study emphasized that they have been called names by perpetrators. For example, participant 3 said: *“In my very first project my work was not that great. So, the feedback that I got from my manager was as if I was already this high-earning 20-year-old research veteran. All sought of name calling... “I hired you because I saw potential, but your work is “crap” you are submitting “crap” reports.” Are you really representing the university you are coming from? This is substandard; I was not expecting this from you”*. Participant 3 also stated that he was also subjected to oppressive words which made him feel down. The first participant said: *“She made me know my place as an intern through her ugly words. She said I had a stupid attitude.*

In addition, participant 5 reported that *“it is an emotional abuse like you just come to work and you have that person telling you the way you are, being told how short or ugly you are”*. Participant 8 said *“he would say “Who do you think you are? Do you want to outsmart me? You, how?”* Participant 11 also said: *when she said I am slow; I can still remember what happened. Besides, she has a tendency to call me slow in front of customers. Furthermore, participant 18 stated that “in most cases, he would yell at me, at times insult me in front of students and colleagues. He would come to class and talk to me like he was talking to a child. “Here we do not care about you when you came, we were already working without you, if you don't want to work you can go”*.

Threats

The interviews conducted have revealed that participants (3,4,11,16,17 &18) were subjected to threats which they refer to as bullying behaviour. Participant 4 said: *“I was told that if I don't do as ordered, I would be reported to the manager or submit a report to the line manager explaining why I was not delivering to my duties”*. On the other hand, participant 11 stated that being threatened became a norm in the sense that with every mistake that he made he was threatened that he would lose his job. Similarly, participant 16 was also subjected to the same threat of losing his job: *“Every mistake that I would do he would tell me that he is aware, and I should not worry we will meet each other the following year, it was a threat in a sense that he was not going to renew my contract since I was employed on a contract basis”*. Furthermore, participant 17 faced some threats when she said: *“when you question his judgment, he will make you feel that your job is on the line”*. Participants 19 and 21 experienced the same threat. Thus, research participants stated that threats made by perpetrators (managers) resulted in a toxic work environment (participants 3 & 5).

Unfair treatment

Unfair treatment is characterized by favouritism. Thus, Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara and Sua´rez-Acosta (2013) are of the opinion that employees' perceptions of the fairness of the treatment they receive from their organisations play a significant role in employees' well-being. Eleven research participants argued that unfair treatment is significantly related to bullying behaviour. For example, Participant 10

highlighted a situation whereby she felt bullied, for example: *“I was bullied in the sense that you are not her favourite when marks are needed after marking, she would leave the other people and only tell you that she wants the marks before the school close”*. Participant 13 mentioned two incidents where she felt bullied, she said: *“...and later on, after two years, she appointed someone permanently with no post advertised and that person did not even have a master’s degree. I asked myself why she would refuse my appointment and others got it”*. She also stated, *“...later on, I realised that same person who had similar contracts got the money”*.

Yelling to cause public humiliation

In this study, the majority of participants (n=16) stressed that perpetrators used “yelling” as a communication strategy publicly. Therefore, participants spoke about yelling as bullying behaviour. For instance, in the context of a story being told by Participant 3, he said that whenever he submitted his work to the manager, the manager yelled at him, instead of talking to him like a professional. For Participant 8 being yelled at became a norm. For example, *“no you can’t be on leave, no no no no! You can’t be on leave”* (yelling). Participant 11 said, *“The manager came shouting and yelling...”* Participant 14 also encountered the same behaviour he mentioned *“She started yelling, what have you been doing? We are paying you for nothing”*. Participant 15 reported some incidents. Participant 15 said: *“I did as instructed, but later on, he came back yelling I did not tell you to work there, I told you to go pack the stock at the back”, he yelled at me, telling me that he was not going to give me my salary because what I did was so unprofessional and “he shouts at everyone”*.

Infringement of rights

Infringement of rights was mentioned as one of the major forms of bullying behaviour by research participants. The second, sixth and seventh participants felt that it is an infringement of rights when employees render service to the employer and do not get remuneration for services rendered. Participant 2 mentioned that *“while they are still waiting for their contracts to be renewed, they are expected to continue with the tasks not getting paid. When their contracts were renewed, these employees were not back paid”*. Participant 6 said *“I was not paid for the two months that I have worked without the appointment letter. According to me, it is bullying because when I inquired, I was asked why I needed money, but then why do you need my services if you can’t pay me? That to me it is bullying like why you want me to work if you know you can’t pay me for my services”*. Participant 7 also stated that *“sometimes we would work the entire month which is four weeks, and they would tell you that you are only going to claim three weeks. And they did not have concrete reasons for such changes and sometimes we would not get paid, and if you did not get paid on a particular month remember that you still have expenses to cover”*.

Work overload

In this current study, work overload is defined “as being asked to do too much work and being asked to do work that is too difficult” (Ali & Farooqi, 2014: 23). Some research participants considered work overload to be related to workplace bullying. Participant 2 noted two work overload incidents that are related to bullying behaviour. Participant 2 stated that *“People will be allocated duties but more often they will be called to perform duties that were not allocated to them”* and *“those employed on a part-time basis are expected to work long hours even though their contract stipulated few hours (e.g., 6 hours per week) mind you, they are not paid for those extra hours”*. Another participant said, *“Even though you knew that you delayed giving me feedback you expect me to work under pressure to meet my second deadline without extension”* (participant 3). Another research participant was also subjected to similar behaviour (participant 21).

Participant 14 said *“There was this other lady from sales who used to dump her workload on me and go out for lunch for over four hours. And when she came back, she expected me to have been done with her work”* and *“the ladies would come every day, each one of them would come and give their tasks or duties while they had coffee and talking for hours. At the end of the day, all of them expected me to give them completed work. During the day, they would be asking me how far I was with the tasks that they gave me”*. Participant 14 further said, *“According to what I heard that work was supposed to be done in a week and she expected me to do the work in few hours”*.

Domineering

Domineering refers to being ready and willing to conform to higher authority. Some research participants were subjected to bullying behaviour because they refused to be submissive and do as ordered by managers. Thus, they also had to be submissive to protect their employment. For example, the fifth participant said, *“I was employed as a contractor and when the time came to get my contract renewed it became difficult for my contract to be renewed because I did not do what my supervisor wanted, a romantic relationship”*. Participant 6 experienced similar behaviour because she said *“At first, I worked well with my research supervisor and colleague up until to a point that he had a “thing” for me. Because I said no to his advances, the process started to be slow”*.

Another participant stated: *“We had this principal who wanted to form a group of people who were from Limpopo, if you did not want to be part of the group, she would bully you”* (participant 10). Furthermore, participant 13 stated that *“...like with my other colleagues we were not getting along with her because this person loved to be worshipped. And we were not good at giving unnecessary praise. I personally give praise where they are due. So that woman preferred that”*. Participant 2 stated that they were desperate for employment which gave the perpetrator too much power and control. Participant 7 shared the same view and said, *“The contract that I had was a disadvantage. They knew we needed employment”*. Participant 19 mentioned that most of them were defenceless. They also allowed bullying to happen to them. Age also played a significant role when other research participants (16 & 14) were bullied because of their age.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, shared themes from individual accounts of workplace bullying incidents were clearly explained as verbal actions rather than physical or non-verbal actions (e.g., body language). Therefore, forms of bullying behaviour such as disrespect, rumours or bad-mouthing, name-calling, threats, unfair treatment, insults, public humiliation, and infringement of rights were identified. All these were generated from indigenous perspectives and understanding of workplace bullying. Most research participants seemed to have been victims because of their employment status. Thus, most of them were just starting their careers. They were forced to be humble and succumb to the given circumstances because of fear of the unknown and future employment conditions. Nevertheless, power was another contributing factor to bullying behaviour. Those with high authority were reported as being perpetrators who took advantage of those who did not have any authority.

In some situations, those who served their organisations for a long time used that as power over those who just started their career. Nonetheless, in some instances, because of the connection they have with people in high authority, they felt as if they could do as they want to victims because they have protection from higher authority. Thus, the power imbalance continues to be one of the contributing factors to bullying behaviour. Those without power experienced bullying more. Besides, the literature agrees that bullying behaviour is an arena suffused by power differences (Hodson et al., 2006; De Wet, 2014; Bernstein & Trimm, 2016). The results of the study clearly show the severity of workplace bullying

on employee's integrity, self-esteem, turnover, career, emotional well-being, performance, and commitment. This automatically affects organisations because it leads to unexplained absenteeism, late coming, poor morale among employees and poor concentration at work. It revealed the level of how bullying behaviour can lead to a toxic working environment. Therefore, the study recommends that organisations should develop anti-bullying policies taking into consideration the diverse nature of the workforce. The purpose of the anti-bullying policies should be clearly communicated to all respective stakeholders (employees, supervisors, managers, and executive management). These anti-bullying policies should highlight the severity of consequences (e.g., Demotion or dismissal) to those who are found guilty of such transgression.

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