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Workplace bullying in New Zealand: A survey of employee perceptions and attitudes*

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Abstract

Bullying at work, a severe form of anti-social behaviour, has become an issue of major concern to workers, organisations, unions and governments. It has also received considerable attention in organisational behaviour and human resource management research over the past 20+ years. Research has been conducted on the prevalence of bullying at work and factors which contribute to bullying, but less attention has been accorded to personal coping with bullying and organisational-level responses to counteract bullying. The present paper reports findings from a survey of over 1700 employees of 36 organisations in New Zealand. We describe the reported incidence of bullying at work, along with relevant work attitudes and experiences, including psychological strain, ratings of subjective well-being, and levels of commitment to the organisation. Personal experience of bullying was

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reported by 17.8% of respondents, and was significantly correlated with higher levels of strain, reduced well-being, reduced commitment to their organisation, and lower self-rated performance. Personal coping strategies were generally unrelated to these outcomes. On the other hand, the perceived effectiveness of organisational efforts to deal with bullying was considered an important contributor to both the occurrence of bullying and reduced negative effects of bullying. Overall, our findings illustrate the importance of developing organisational-level strategies to reduce the incidence of bullying and to counteract its negative impact, rather than expecting individuals to develop personal strategies to cope with this problem.

Keywords

coping, organisational responses, psychological well-being, work attitudes and performance, workplace bullying

Anti-social behaviour in the workplace has become an issue of increasing concern to workers and their organisations, as well as unions and even government agencies (such as departments of labour). Various types of anti-social behaviour can occur in work settings, such as interpersonal conflict, harassment and even physical violence, and these can have a significant impact on individuals, teams and the organisation as a whole. One particular form of anti-social behaviour which has received attention in the past 20 years is *workplace bullying*, which has become a substantial and potentially costly issue for organisations globally. Leading researchers have suggested that bullying is a 'more crippling and devastating problem for employees than all other kinds of work-related stress put together' (Einarsen et al. 2003, 3).

Definitions of workplace bullying (sometimes also referred to as 'mobbing' by European researchers), and even the terminology used to describe this phenomenon, have varied considerably. However, a frequently used definition is that proposed by Norwegian researchers Ståle Einarsen and his collaborators, who have described bullying as 'situations where a person repeatedly and over a period of time is exposed to negative acts (i.e. constant abuse, offensive remarks or teasing, ridicule or social exclusion) on the part of co-workers, supervisors or subordinates, and where the person confronted has difficulties defending himself/herself against this mistreatment' (Einarsen 2000, 383–4). This definition incorporates four main elements: a) the target person is exposed (either directly or indirectly) to unwanted negative acts which can range from subtle to blatant abuse, b) the negative acts are repeated regularly, c) they occur over a prolonged period of time, and d) there is a real or perceived imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the target, hence the target person feels that they cannot defend or protect themselves against this behaviour (Nielsen, Matthiesen and Einarsen 2010). Adopting this perspective, a one-off incident of negative behaviour or interpersonal conflict is not considered to be bullying.

Numerous investigations of work-related bullying have been conducted internationally, many of them utilising an instrument developed by Einarsen and his colleagues, the Negative Acts Questionnaire (NAQ), which probes how often individuals have experienced a range of negative behaviours (see for example, Hauge,

Skogstad and Einarsen 2007). These behaviours include: humiliating or ridiculing a person, spreading gossip or rumours about them, shouting at or verbally abusing the individual, withholding important information, persistent unwarranted criticism of their work performance, and threats of violence or physical abuse. Although there has been variability in the criteria used to classify individuals as targets of bullying based on their responses to the NAQ, a conservative criterion is that two or more of the behaviours need to have been experienced at least once per week over the previous six months (Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy and Alberts 2007). Some investigators (for instance, Salin 2001) have, in addition, asked respondents if they have *felt bullied*, then compared the self-reports of feeling bullied with NAQ scores.

The prevalence of workplace bullying in various countries has been explored in several studies. Interestingly, despite some variability between studies (even within a single country), prevalence rates are remarkably consistent across countries. Nielsen, Matthiesen and Einarsen (2010) conducted a meta-analysis of 86 independent studies across several countries, reporting an overall rate of workplace bullying of 14.6%, although rates for self-labelled bullying were somewhat lower (11.3%) when bullying was defined for respondents, and higher (18.1%) when no definition of bullying was provided to respondents. One caveat noted by these authors is that the majority of research on this topic has been conducted in Scandinavia and other European countries. There is little evidence from countries such as Australia and New Zealand. The need for more systematic investigation of this phenomenon in non-European countries is evident; hence a major aim of the present study was to provide information on bullying in New Zealand workplaces.

The impact of bullying on individuals and the organisation as a whole has also been frequently investigated. International research has illustrated that targets report low self-esteem, more negative emotions, high anxiety and stress, and higher levels of depression than those who have not experienced bullying at work (see, for example, Agervold and Mikkelsen 2004; Bowling and Beehr 2006; Rodriguez-Munoz et al. 2009). As interpersonal conflict (including bullying) is one of the strongest predictors of psychological strain, it is important to assess the impact of bullying on individuals' feelings of strain, well-being, and other work-related attitudes and behaviours, such as their affective commitment to the organisation (McCormack et al. 2009) and their self-rated work performance (Moayed et al. 2006). In the present study we investigated relationships of bullying (the experience of negative acts) with psychological strain, subjective well-being, affective organisational commitment, and self-reported job performance. In line with previous research, we predicted that:

Hypothesis 1: Bullying will be a) positively associated with levels of psychological strain, and negatively associated with b) subjective well-being, c) affective commitment and d) self-rated job performance levels.

Researchers have suggested that several factors may act to protect people against the negative impact of workplace bullying. One of these is the level of social support which the person receives from other people in their work environment, such as their supervisor and work colleagues, as well as their perceptions of how supportive in general their organisation is. Perhaps surprisingly, few studies have explored the

effects of these forms of social support. An Australian study of police officers (Tuckey et al. 2009) illustrated that support from others was negatively related to bullying, although these researchers did not explore whether support contributed to more positive outcomes, such as reduced strain and increased well-being. In the work stress literature, however, there is fairly consistent evidence that support from colleagues (Rousseau et al. 2008) and organisational support (Chen et al. 2009) are associated with positive outcomes. Based on this literature as well as the findings reported by Tuckey et al. (2009), we hypothesised that:

Hypothesis 2: Bullying will be negatively related to perceived support from a) supervisors, b) work colleagues and c) the organisation as a whole.

Hypothesis 3: Support from each of the above sources will be a) negatively related to psychological strain and positively related to b) subjective well-being, c) affective commitment and d) self-rated job performance.

In addition to studies which have examined associations between self-labelled bullying and negative attitudes and emotional states, there has also been some research on how individuals attempt to deal with bullying at work, and the effects of their coping efforts (Hogh and Dofradottir 2001). In general, personal coping efforts have been found to be relatively ineffective in reducing bullying and may make only a small contribution to improving psychosocial health and well-being in targets (Olafsson and Johannsdottir 2004). Under some circumstances, endeavouring to resolve a bullying situation may be counter-productive, as it can lead to an escalation of bullying behaviours. Nevertheless, the stress management literature suggests that problem-focused coping is normally an effective strategy for reducing the occurrence or impact of stressors (Boyd, Lewin and Sager 2009). On the other hand, a passive response (avoidance) to the conflict can generate negative outcomes (Dijkstra, van Dierendonck and Evers 2005). Our study included an assessment of problem-focused and avoidance (resigned) personal coping strategies to explore their potential relationship with bullying. We hypothesised that:

Hypothesis 4: Problem-focused coping will be negatively related to a) bullying and b) psychological strain, and positively related to c) subjective well-being, d) affective commitment, and e) self-rated job performance.

Hypothesis 5: Avoidance/resigned coping will be positively related to a) bullying and b) psychological strain, and negatively related to c) subjective well-being, d) affective commitment, and e) self-rated job performance.

Less attention has been given to the impact of organisational responses to bullying – that is, efforts by managers both to reduce levels of bullying and to minimise the negative consequences of bullying on their employees. Few studies have investigated the impact of strategies such as identifying the risk factors for increased bullying, monitoring social interactions between staff, or putting in place consequences for bullying (Saam 2010). In a recent review article, Saam noted that direct workplace

interventions to address bullying behaviours are comparatively rare, and their effects have not been systematically explored. There is a vast literature on stress management interventions (Dewe, O'Driscoll and Cooper 2010), but research on organisational efforts to deal with bullying is relatively sparse. Furthermore, this research has tended to focus on the outcomes of ineffective strategies, such as accepting and normalising negative behaviours, blaming the target, and attributing the bullying to 'personality conflict' (Ferris 2004). In the present research, we examined a range of management practices which may be relevant to addressing workplace bullying and its consequences, in order to assess New Zealand workers' perceptions of whether or not these practices were effective in reducing bullying in their organisation and the potential positive outcomes of such practices for individual employees. Given the exploratory nature of this element of our research, we did not formulate specific hypotheses concerning the differential effectiveness of various organisational responses. Nevertheless, our expectation was that individuals would rate organisational initiatives which more directly addressed bullying issues as being more effective than those which did not tackle bullying directly.

Method

Sample

Participants for this study were recruited from 36 New Zealand organisations across four different industry sectors: education, health, hospitality and travel. These sectors were chosen for several reasons, primarily to obtain a reasonably broad representation across New Zealand industry sectors and to cover a range of industries which differ in occupational professionalisation. In addition, international research has reported relatively high rates of bullying in the education, health and hospitality industries (Foster, Mackie and Barnett 2004; Mathisen, Einarsen and Mykletun 2008; McCormack et al. 2009). The total number of respondents to our survey was 1733, approximately 68% of whom came from the health and education sectors, hence a high percentage (78.8%) of respondents were female. The average age of the sample was 43.3 years ($SD = 12.58$). The reported ethnicity representation was: New Zealand European (1293, 74.6%); Māori (144, 8.3%); Pasifika (61, 3.5%); Other European (212, 12.2%); Asian (44, 2.0%); and Other (308, 17.8%). Participants had spent on average 7.4 years ($SD = 8.33$) years in their present job, and on average 7.1 years ($SD = 7.05$) in their current organisation. The percentages of respondents occupying specific roles in their organisation were as follows: senior management/executives 5.0%, middle-level management 14.6%, first-line supervisors 10.6%, and non-managerial/supervisory employees 59.0%. (Approximately 11% of respondents did not indicate their level of responsibility.)

Procedure

Permission to recruit participants in each organisation was obtained from the HR manager or another senior manager. Participants completed a computer-based survey, either online or on a laptop. Laptops were set up in a central location in

each organisation, with each laptop housed in an individually screened area so that participants could complete the survey privately. An online option was provided for participants who preferred to complete the survey at a time and location convenient to them. Ethical approval for the research was obtained from the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (Northern).

Measures

A questionnaire was constructed to assess the variables of interest in this research, including established measures of bullying, work attitudes, job performance, psychological strain, and psychosocial well-being. A list of potential organisational initiatives to address workplace bullying was developed specifically for this study, based on a review of the literature on stress management and the limited international research on bullying interventions. Each of the measures is described below. For all items, 'no opinion', 'not applicable' and 'do not know' responses were recoded as missing data.

Bullying was assessed in two distinct ways. The major instrument used was the 22-item revised version of the Negative Acts Questionnaire (NAQ-R) constructed by Einarsen and his associates (see Hauge, Skogstad and Einarsen 2007). This measure lists 22 negative behaviours that may be displayed towards a person at work, and asks the respondent to indicate how often they have experienced each behaviour over the previous 6 months. Responses range from 0 (never) to 4 (daily). Two scores were computed for each respondent. First, the mean response across the 22 items was computed to yield an 'average' score for each person. This is referred to below as the *mean bullying* score. The internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) for this measure was 0.93. Second, we computed a binary bullying score to classify group participants as either bullied or not bullied. Following Hauge, Skogstad and Einarsen (2007), the criterion was that participants had to have experienced at least two of the negative behaviours weekly or more frequently over the past six months. Respondents were assigned a score of 1 on any item to which they responded 'weekly or more often'; those who obtained a score of 2 or more across the 22 items were classified as having been bullied based on Hauge, Skogstad and Einarsen's (2007) criterion; respondents who scored less than 2 were classified as non-bullied. This is referred to as the *binary bullying* score.

The second method of assessing bullying experiences was to provide respondents with a brief definition of bullying, followed by a single item asking them whether, over the previous 6 months, they felt that they personally had experienced bullying in their workplace. The response markers for this item were 0 (no) to 4 (yes, almost daily). This is referred to below as *self-labelled bullying*.

Psychological strain was measured via the 12-item version of the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12; Goldberg 1972), which has been frequently used in previous research on occupational strain at work (see, for instance, Kalliath, O'Driscoll and Brough 2004). Respondents were asked to indicate how often, on a scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 3 (much more than usual), they had experienced each of the 12 psychosocial symptoms in the previous 6 months. Example items include 'felt constantly under strain' and 'been losing confidence in yourself'. Six of the items were positively worded, hence were reverse-scored so that a higher score on the instrument indicated

greater strain. An overall strain score was obtained by computing the mean score for each person across the 12 items. Cronbach's alpha was 0.88.

Subjective well-being was assessed using Warr's (1990) list of affective adjectives, each responded to on a scale ranging from 1 (never) to 6 (all the time). Respondents were asked to indicate how often they had felt each of these affective experiences in their job over the previous 6 months. Example adjectives included 'tense', 'calm', 'depressed', 'cheerful' and 'optimistic'. Negatively worded adjectives (such as 'tense' and 'depressed') were recoded so that a high score indicated greater psychosocial well-being. An overall psychosocial well-being score was obtained by computing the mean score for each person across the 15 adjectives. This measure demonstrated high internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.95$).

Affective commitment to the organisation. This variable was measured via the Meyer and Allen (1997) 6-item instrument. Each item was responded to on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). A sample item was 'I really feel as if this organisation's problems are my own'. Three negatively worded items in this measure were reverse-scored so that a high score indicated greater commitment to the organisation. An overall commitment score for each person was obtained by computing their mean score across the 6 items, and the alpha coefficient was 0.83.

Social support from supervisor and work colleagues. Levels of support from their supervisor and work colleagues were tapped via 4 items (O'Driscoll, Brough and Kalliath 2004) asking respondents how often they received helpful information or advice, sympathetic understanding and concern, clear and helpful feedback, and practical assistance, from a) their supervisor and b) their work colleagues. The response scale ranged from 0 (never) to 5 (all the time). Separate scores were computed for supervisor support and colleague support, by computing the respondent's mean score across the four items in each case. Cronbach's alphas were 0.95 (supervisor support) and 0.94 (colleague support).

Perceptions of organisational support. Perceptions of the overall amount of support which respondents felt they obtained from their organisation were gauged via 7 items taken from a measure constructed by Eisenberger et al. (1986), responded to on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). A sample item was 'help is available from my organisation when I have a problem'. An overall perceived organisational support score for each person was obtained by computing their mean score across the 7 items, and the internal consistency was 0.95.

Job performance. Individuals' perceptions of their job performance were measured via a single item which asked them to rate, on a 1–10 scale, their overall job performance on the days they had worked over the previous four weeks. This item was adopted from Kessler et al. (2003), who reported strong psychometric properties for the measure.

Personal coping strategies were assessed with 6 items taken from the Copenhagen Psycho-Social Questionnaire (COPSOQ; Kristensen et al. 2005). Respondents who reported that they had been bullied over the previous 6 months were asked to indicate how often they had engaged in various coping behaviours, on a scale ranging from 0 (never) to 5 (always). Two types of coping were assessed with these items: problem-focused coping (4 items) and avoidance/resigned coping (2 items). Sample items included: 'did something to solve the

problem' (problem-focused coping) and 'accepted the situation because there was nothing to do about it anyway' (avoidance/resigned coping). A coping score for each respondent on each sub-scale was obtained by computing their mean score across the items in that sub-scale. Internal consistencies were 0.83 (problem-focused coping) and 0.77 (avoidance coping).

Effectiveness of organisational initiatives. A set of 13 potential actions which organisations might engage in to address bullying-related problems was developed from the literatures on stress management and bullying interventions. These actions included: 'efforts to identify the occurrence of bullying in this workplace', 'developing a system for reporting incidents of bullying', encouraging open and respectful communication between people', and 'reviewing procedures for dealing with bullying'. All respondents were asked to rate the effectiveness of each of these actions in their workplace, on a scale ranging from 1 (very ineffective) to 6 (very effective). The overall perceived effectiveness of organisational initiatives was determined by computing each respondent's mean rating across the 13 initiatives.

Results

Means and standard deviations for all variables, and their inter-correlations, are shown in Table 1. The overall levels of self-labelled bullying were relatively low (3.9%). When asked directly whether they had experienced bullying, 12.4% of respondents reported having been bullied 'now and then'. However, using the NAQ binary scoring procedure described above, 17.8% of respondents ($n = 308$) were scored as having been bullied, based on the criterion of experiencing at least two negative acts at least weekly. This is a relatively strict criterion for recording bullying. Specific negative acts (in the NAQ) which were reported more often included: having important information withheld, being exposed to an unmanageable workload, and being ignored or excluded. Least frequently reported experiences were: threats of violence or physical abuse, being the butt of practical jokes, and excessive teasing or sarcasm.

Reported sources of bullying were: employer (31.6%), senior manager (36.9%), middle manager (32.8%), supervisor (36.4%), colleague (56.1%), subordinate (19.5%), and client or customer (26.9%). These responses illustrate interesting comparisons, for example that employers, senior managers, middle managers and supervisors were all identified as the source of bullying by approximately the same number of targets (31–36%), whereas bullying from work colleagues was reported substantially more often (56%). 'Upward' bullying (by subordinates) was reported by almost one in five targets.

The correlations displayed in Table 1 provide general support for hypotheses 1 and 2, concerning the relationships between bullying and work attitudes and performance. NAQ scores (our primary measure of bullying) were significantly related to psychological strain ($r = 0.44$), well-being ($r = -0.59$), affective commitment ($r = -0.36$), and self-rated job performance ($r = -0.25$), supporting hypothesis 1. Self-labelled bullying was also significantly related to strain ($r = 0.20$), well-being ($r = -0.26$), and affective commitment ($r = -0.17$), although these correlations were notably lower than those

Table 1. Means, standard deviations and correlations between variables

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1 NAQ	1.5	.56											
2 Self-report bullying	N/A	N/A	.45										
3 Strain	1.3	.56	.44	.20									
4 Well-being	3.9	.98	-.59	-.26	-.68								
5 Affective commitment	4.5	1.48	-.36	-.17	-.36	.51							
6 Supervisor support	3.8	1.39	-.40	-.17	-.42	.51	.39						
7 Colleague support	3.8	1.16	-.24	-.09	-.24	.33	.26	.43					
8 Organisational support	4.5	1.77	-.47	-.22	-.49	.63	.65	.58	.31				
9 Job performance	7.7	1.24	-.25	-.07	-.27	.35	.19	.20	.18	.21			
10 Problem-focused coping	3.9	1.17	.21	.20	.06	-.09	.04	.07	.11	.04	.06		
11 Avoidance/resigned coping	3.4	1.39	.11	.02	.08	-.13	-.10	-.14	.02	-.15	-.02	-.23	
12 Organisational responses	3.8	1.54	-.44	-.25	-.38	.49	.41	.47	.26	.57	.19	.07	-.14

Ns = 1709 to 1728.

Correlations > 0.10 significant at $p < 0.01$.

for the NAQ measure. The correlation between self-labelled bullying and job performance was not significant ($r = -0.07$).

In addition, NAQ scores showed significant negative correlations with all three forms of social support, thus confirming hypothesis 2. Interestingly, the correlations with perceived organisational support (-0.47) and supervisor support (-0.40) were both somewhat higher than that with co-worker support (-0.24), suggesting that the first two forms of support may be more directly pertinent to bullying than collegial support. Finally, all three forms of support showed significant correlations, in the expected directions, with the four criterion variables (strain, well-being, affective commitment, and job performance), confirming hypothesis 3. Again, organisational support showed somewhat stronger relationships with these criterion variables than did the two other forms of social support, especially colleague support. Correlations of support with self-rated job performance were lower than those for the three other criterion variables (see Table 1), but were nevertheless significant.

The above correlational results are supported by comparisons between respondents classified as bullied and non-bullied, based on the binary bullying score (see Table 2). Significant differences between these two groups were identified on almost all variables. Bullied respondents exhibited higher strain, and lower well-being, affective commitment and self-rated job performance than did their non-bullied counterparts. They also perceived significantly less support from their supervisors, colleagues and the organisation as a whole.

Ratings of bullying frequency do not provide any indication of the severity of the behaviour, and even an infrequently occurring bullying action may have a strong impact on the target's well-being. To ascertain the relative contributions of each negative act to the target's levels of psychological strain and subjective well-being, multiple regressions were performed (see Table 3). These regressions demonstrated

Table 2. Differences between bullied and non-bullied respondents

Variables	Bullied respondents		Non-bullied respondents		t
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Strain	1.8	.56	1.2	.50	19.09***
Well-being	3.0	.87	4.3	.86	-21.69***
Affective commitment	3.6	1.43	4.7	1.41	-12.68***
Supervisor support	2.9	1.36	4.8	1.33	-13.03***
Colleague support	3.8	1.31	4.3	1.12	-6.72***
Organisational support	3.0	1.67	4.8	1.62	-18.08***
Job performance	7.2	1.41	7.8	1.18	-7.78***
Problem-focused coping	4.0	1.11	3.9	1.23	1.48
Avoidance/resigned coping	3.7	1.43	3.2	1.33	3.06**
Organisational response effectiveness	2.6	1.32	4.1	1.45	-16.13***

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 3. Regressions of psychological strain and subjective well-being onto specific negative acts in the NAQ

Predictor variables	Strain		Well-being	
	β	t	β	t
Exposed to unmanageable workload	.27	9.43***	-.22	-7.92***
Ignored or excluded	.16	4.99***	-.11	-3.57***
Hints or signals to quit job	.14	4.49***	-.07	2.31*
Opinions/views ignored	.10	2.94**	-.10	-3.19**
Unreasonable deadlines imposed	.05	1.84	-.12	-4.03***
	$R^2 = .40$		$R^2 = .43$	
	F (22, 1424) = 43.83***		F (22, 1424) = 49.18***	

$p < 0.05^{**}$; $p < 0.01^{***}$; $p < 0.001$.

Note: Only predictors which made a significant contribution to at least one of the criterion variables are displayed here.

that the major contributors to increased strain and reduced well-being were: being exposed to an unmanageable workload, being ignored or excluded, hints or signals that one should quit the job, and being given unreasonable deadlines or impossible targets to achieve. Overall, bullying behaviours contributed 40% of the variance in psychological strain and 43% of the variance in subjective well-being.

Relationships between bullying scores and a) personal coping responses and b) perceptions of organisations' responses are also depicted in Table 1. Correlations between bullying (as reflected by the NAQ and self-report measures) and coping strategies were relatively small. There were significant correlations between problem focused coping and the two measures of bullying, but these correlations were positive rather than negative, as we had predicted, and the effect sizes are modest at best. Avoidance/resigned coping was significantly related to NAQ scores, although the correlation was low ($r=0.11$), but was unrelated to self-labelled bullying ($r=0.02$). Hypotheses 4 and 5 did not, therefore, receive strong support. Furthermore, our findings suggest that those who experience bullying were (somewhat) more likely to engage in these forms of coping (particularly problem-focused), rather than that coping led to a reduction in bullying (see also Table 2 for comparisons between bullied and non-bullied respondents).

Higher NAQ and self-labelled bullying scores were related to lower perceptions of the effectiveness of organisational responses to bullying (Table 1). Those who experienced negative acts were more likely to believe that their organisation's efforts to deal with bullying were ineffective. The comparisons displayed in Table 2 confirm significant differences between bullied and non-bullied respondents in their ratings of the effectiveness of organisational efforts to reduce bullying.

Finally, as noted earlier, a major aim of this investigation was to explore whether some organisational efforts to deal with bullying were perceived as being

Table 4. Perceived effectiveness of organisational responses to bullying

Organisational response	Mean	SD
Encourage open communication	4.2	1.60
Encourage appropriate interactions	4.0	1.64
Develop bullying policy	3.9	1.80
Develop complaints procedure	3.9	1.81
Resolve conflicts quickly and fairly	3.8	1.71
Manage relationships	3.8	1.71
Develop reporting system	3.7	1.77
Increase awareness about bullying	3.7	1.78
Identify bullying occurrence	3.5	1.72
Review procedures	3.5	1.78
Identify bullying factors	3.4	1.72
Establish consequences	3.4	1.90
Monitor staff relationships	3.4	1.82

Response scale = 1 (very ineffective) to 6 (very effective).

Ns = 977 to 1388.

more effective than others (see Table 4). Mean scores ranged between 3.4 and 4.2, suggesting that on average each organisational response was viewed as falling between 'somewhat ineffective' and 'somewhat effective'. Only four organisational responses approached the 'somewhat effective' category: encouraging open and respectful communication; encouraging appropriate interactions between staff; developing a workplace bullying policy; and developing a clear procedure for handling complaints about bullying. Organisational responses which received lower ratings included: identifying factors which might encourage bullying; establishing clear consequences for those who engage in bullying; and monitoring and reviewing staff relationships, especially fair treatment of people.

Discussion

This study is the first systematic quantitative investigation of workplace bullying and its potential consequences for organisations in New Zealand, along with strategies which may contribute to a reduction in work-related bullying. A major aim of our research was to explore the reported incidence of bullying. Based on responses to the Negative Acts Questionnaire, we identified 17.8% of respondents as having been bullied at work over the previous six months. Although this may not appear to be a substantial percentage, it does reflect a rate of workplace bullying which is overall slightly higher than that reported in other studies internationally, where prevalence rates of between 5% and 20% are the norm (Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy and Alberts 2007; Nielsen et al. 2009; Nielsen, Matthiesen and Einarsen 2010; O'Moore, Lynch and Daeid 2003), despite the fact that we used a stringent criterion for defining

bullying. Nielsen, Matthiesen and Einarsen (2010) reported findings from a meta-analysis which indicated an average bullying rate of 14.6%. If the industries in our sample are typical of New Zealand organisations, the present results suggest that bullying may be somewhat more prevalent in New Zealand than in other countries (at least those where it has been systematically investigated). The fact that almost one in five workers was classified as being bullied is a concern from a health, well-being and safety perspective.

In addition to the incidence rate, we also explored potential linkages between reported negative acts and workers' reactions and experiences at work. As shown in tables 1 and 2, being bullied was associated negatively with respondents' work attitudes and perceived job performance, and with increased levels of strain and reduced subjective well-being. These findings are consistent with results reported in international studies (Agervold and Mikkelsen 2004; Einarsen et al. 2003). Table 2 illustrates that workers classified as having been bullied (using the NAQ criterion) reported lower well-being, commitment to their organisation, and job performance, and higher levels of psychological strain, than their non-bullied colleagues. Our findings add to the growing international literature on the negative outcomes of these anti-social and disruptive behaviours. The results obtained in our study have substantial implications, as they illustrate the heavy cost of bullying and harassment for individual workers (targets) and organisational productivity. Although not reported here, we also obtained evidence that witnesses to bullying (that is, people in the organisation who had not personally experienced bullying, but had witnessed it occurring to others) were also affected by the occurrence of bullying, although clearly not to the same extent as direct targets (Cooper-Thomas et al. 2011).

One potential limitation of the NAQ as an index of bullying is that it assesses reported *frequencies* of behaviours experienced, and does not directly tap into the *severity* of these behaviours in terms of their impact on a person's well-being. Some of the negative acts in the NAQ may be potentially more damaging to a person, even if they are infrequently experienced, whereas other more frequently experienced behaviours may not be as salient to the target's well-being. Our findings indicate that the 22 assessed behaviours explain approximately 40% of the variance in well-being and psychological strain, suggesting that, as a set, these actions do have an impact on important individual experiences. We also found that some NAQ behaviours were more closely associated with strain and well-being than others, even when they were not necessarily the behaviours experienced most frequently (see Table 3). An implication of this finding is that managers need to pay particular attention to those actions which are most likely to increase strain and reduce well-being among targets of bullying.

We also observed that bullying was negatively linked with all three forms of social support (supervisor, colleague and organisational), especially supervisor support and perceived organisational support. Individuals who reported greater support from their supervisor and a general feeling of support from their organisation were significantly less likely to report having experienced negative acts from others in their workplace. This suggests that social support may buffer the relationship between this stressor and feelings of strain and well-being, and that one mechanism for ameliorating the negative consequences of bullying and harassment may be the provision of

both supervisor and organisational support. Hence these findings have implications for organisational efforts to reduce bullying. Colleague support, on the other hand, was less connected with bullying. Although non-bullied respondents did report greater levels of colleague support than their bullied counterparts (see Table 2), the correlations in Table 1 illustrate that colleague support was less associated than supervisor or organisational support with strain, well-being, and affective commitment to the organisation.

Two other dimensions were also investigated in this research – the extent to which personal coping efforts can make a difference to the occurrence of bullying and workers' experiences of it, and perceptions of the effectiveness of organisational responses to bullying. It is evident that neither problem-focused nor avoidance/resigned coping was strongly related to either the experience of bullying or the negative outcomes of bullying. Respondents who were bullied were somewhat more likely to report using avoidance/resigned coping (Table 2), which stress-coping research has determined to be an relatively ineffective method for mitigating the negative effects of stressors (Benzur 2009). Of interest in the present context was whether coping strategies bore any relationship to well-being and the other criterion variables assessed in our study. The correlations in Table 1 indicate very small relationships between each coping strategy and strain, subjective well-being, organisational commitment and job performance, ranging from -0.13 to 0.08 . Compared with the other predictor variables included in this research, especially the social support variables, coping did not appear to contribute substantially to work attitudes, well-being and work performance. We suggest that the impact of personal coping on reducing the negative outcomes of bullying is likely to be small.

Finally, and most importantly from an organisational perspective, we explored workers' perceptions of the effectiveness of organisational responses to bullying, and whether the effectiveness of these responses was related to the well-being related variables investigated in this research. As noted earlier, perceptions of effectiveness were low to moderate, and there was relatively little variation in ratings across the 13 potential responses included in our survey. Those which were viewed as being moderately effective included: encouraging open and respectful communication and social interaction among staff, along with developing a bullying policy and complaints procedures. This is encouraging, in that our findings suggest that respondents believed that their organisation was engaging in efforts that may help to alleviate bullying and its consequences.

Nevertheless, even the effectiveness ratings of these responses were not high, illustrating a need for organisations to continue working on these issues. More low-rated responses included: identifying the occurrence of and factors which lead to bullying, establishing consequences for harassment and bullying behaviours, and monitoring staff relationships. Each of these was viewed as being only slightly effective, which suggests that considerably more effort needs to be invested by organisations in developing their understanding of bullying and its outcomes, as well as focusing on identifying and addressing the conditions which can foster or promote bullying behaviours. Overall, it is apparent that more systematic approaches are needed to reduce bullying and harassment, along with more focused attention on the aftermath of these intense and often pervasive forms of interpersonal conflict.

A potential limitation in the current research, and in many other studies conducted on workplace bullying, is that assessment was limited to individuals' self-reports of bullying. It is well known in the organisational and HRM literature that self-reports of certain behaviours do not necessarily correspond with actual behaviour, although self-reports are important sources of information and may ultimately be the primary determinants of a person's affective reactions (Spector 1994). Nevertheless, an individual's statement that they have been bullied needs to be considered in light of other information concerning the nature and context in which an interaction took place. While it was not possible to conduct a contextual analysis in the present study, a complete understanding of bullying would benefit from exploration of not just individuals' perceptions of having been bullied, but also the context in which this has occurred and recognition that there may be different views on the nature of the behaviour engaged in.

Conclusion

The present study has generated information which contributes to our understanding of the nature and incidence of workplace bullying in New Zealand, as well as some of the potential consequences of bullying and harassment and how these problems may be addressed. As with stress management more generally, we argue that addressing bullying should not be left solely to individuals. Although bullying is exhibited in interpersonal conflict, individuals' efforts to alleviate the impact of bullying on their work attitudes and experiences may not be effective and may in some circumstances exacerbate the situation. Hence relying entirely on individuals to 'sort it out' may be ineffectual. Rather, managers (especially senior managers) need to assume responsibility for confronting this issue and must endeavour to take proactive steps to prevent bullying and to mitigate the damaging effects of this anti-social behaviour. In particular managers should be cognizant of behaviours which employees perceive to be inappropriate and threatening, especially behaviours which can have a substantial negative impact on employee well-being. Instigating procedures for increasing awareness of anti-social behaviours and their consequences is an important first step in the management of bullying (and other forms of harassment). In addition, managers can identify processes for addressing bullying-related problems, such as training in more appropriate collegial interaction and treating all organisational members with dignity and respect. Developing a collegial climate is one of the most important precursors to establishing a 'bully-free' work environment. Finally, we would suggest that upper level managers have a responsibility to lead by example and to be constructive and proactive in their efforts to address this serious and relatively pervasive problem in organisations.

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