Workplace Bullying: The Perceptions of the Target, the Alleged Perpetrator and the HR Professional

Integrating Stakeholders' Voices to Improve Practice and Outcomes

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Abstract

Through three exploratory studies encompassing different stakeholder perspectives, this thesis examines what happens when people complain about workplace bullying. In the first study, thirty one participants who had submitted formal complaints described a wide range of negative workplace behaviours as bullying, and all reported detrimental psychological and physical consequences as a result. Perceptions of unfairness was a major theme to emerge from the interviews, as was the importance of complainants validating their experience and obtaining justice through legal and other types of advocacy. Sixty-three per cent of complainants submitted a workers' compensation claim as a result of bullying and an accepted workers' compensation claim was viewed as validating their perception of the bullying.

Thirty accused bullies participated in the second study. Antecedents to the workplace bullying complaints were similar to those found in studies of bullied targets. Many participants viewed themselves as victims of bullying by their staff and others defended their behaviour as legitimate performance management techniques. The accused bullies reported negative psychological health outcomes in terms of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress and suicidal ideation, irrespective of whether they had been found guilty of bullying or not.

The third study examined the bullying complaint process from the perspective of the human resources' (HR) consultant, using focus groups. The main themes to emerge were the framing of bully complaints as conflicts, a push to manage bully complaints through conflict management and conciliatory processes and the lack of

follow-up after complaint resolution. These results are discussed in light of the negative perception of fairness that a conflict-management perspective could have for complainants who believe their bullying allegations have not been taken seriously by the organisation.

Overall, results highlight the subjective nature of the term *bullying* and suggest that a perception of injustice is central to an understanding of workplace bullying. The way that a bullying complaint is framed and managed by HR personnel can serve to exacerbate this sense of unfairness. These studies break the long tradition of primarily only listening to the victims' perspective in workplace bullying research.

Declaration

This work contains no material that has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text of this thesis.

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