

Gender Differences in Workplace Bullying: Teaching Workplace Civility

April E. Bailey

University of South Florida, USA

Abstract. This paper reports the perceptions of students at public four-year institutions through exploring their experiences with workplace bullying in their temporary or part-time positions. Results from four semesters of quantitative data are reviewed as students address common workplace issues related to bullying in the workplace. Results from this study are important as the results bring to light the workplace bullying students face with respect to gender. Almost twice as many female respondents (33.5%) reported being bullied at work, compared to male respondents (18.2%). Chi-square tests show that female employees experience bullying behavior significantly more often than male employees with $p\text{-value} < 0.00$. The study's practical implications include the use of academic modules teaching workplace civility to give students the tools they need to transition to a fulltime worktime environment. Findings from this study will be helpful to faculty and administrators that are tasked to meet AACBS business curriculum mandates. Business schools are to be training future employees or managers to be inclusive and seek diversity within their work teams.

Keywords: workplace bullying, workplace civility, and gender issues in the workplace.

1. Introduction

Workplace bullying is multifaceted and difficult to define in that its victims experience the aggressive behavior differently and may use terms such as “incivility, harassment, emotional abuse, and abusive supervision” (Emamzadeh 2018). This widely defined, prolonged abusive behavior usually has a negative effect on work tasks, offends, and socially excludes others (Carbo & Hughes 2010; Grubb, Roberts, Grosch, & Brightwell 2004). Bullying is instigated by one or more perpetrators and is often manifested as verbal or nonverbal behaviors or sabotaging tactics or a combination of these and it prevents victims from performing satisfactorily (Namie & Namie 2004). The Workplace Bullying Institute (2021) defines bullying as;

repeated, health-harming mistreatment of one or more persons (the targets) by one or more perpetrators. It is abusive conduct that is threatening, humiliating, or intimidating, or work interference — sabotage — which prevents work from

This shortened version of the article is for promotional purposes on publicly accessible databases.

Readers who wish to obtain the full text version of the article can order it via the url

<https://www.neilsonjournals.com/JOBE/abstractjobe15bailey.html>

Any enquiries, please contact the Publishing Editor, Peter Neilson pneilson@neilsonjournals.com

© NeilsonJournals Publishing 2022.

getting done, or verbal abuse (Workplace Bullying Institute, Definition of Workplace Bullying section).

2. Literature Review

Bullying is costly as it interferes with work productivity and impacts employee recruitment and retention (U.S. Workplace Bullying Survey 2017). Bullying is so widespread within schools, online (cyberbullying), and in the workplace that researchers have even begun to study the health impacts of bullying (U.S. Workplace Bullying Survey 2017). “Unethical conduct has reached crisis proportions in business” (Floyd *et al.* 2013). With many business schools falling under the directives of AACBS standards for business curriculum, many faculty members and deans are looking to ways to teach business ethics education in the classroom.

Sixty-three percent of U.S. workers are aware of workplace bullying, 19% have experienced abusive behaviors, and 19% have witnessed bullying (U.S. Workplace Bullying Survey 2017). Bullying results from power inequity between victim and perpetrator. Aggressors hold some type of power (formal or informal) that allows them to bully others. Supervisors in a superior position to the victim hold formal power; alternatively, access to support from an influential person represents an informal source of power. Bullies at work can be a boss or a coworker (Fox & Spector 2005). In the U.S., top-down bullying by a supervisor occurs in 61% of the cases, peer-to-peer bullying occurs in 33% of the cases, and subordinate (bottom-up) bullying occurs in 6% of the cases (U.S. Workplace Bullying Survey 2017).

2.1. Reasons for Bullying

Bullying takes place in the workplace due to multitude of reasons but is based in fear and is an attempt to maintain control. Some of the reasons given in the literature are that the employees are unhealthy individuals, and a toxic work environment will exacerbate the negatives effects of job frustration leading to the employee to abusing another co-worker (Gardner & Johnson 2001). While not a conclusive list, other reasons for workplace bullying include:

- The workplace climate/environment is chaotic and has a lack of leadership (*laissez-faire* managers).
- The workplace is in an industry that employees must compete for the same resources therefore increasing envy and unhealthy aggression or displaced aggression (Gabriel, Butts, Yuan, Rees, & Sliter 2017).

- The bully shows high-risk characteristics of being shameless, aggressive, impulsive, exploitative, does not show empathy, and has an unhealthy competitiveness (Becker, Bailey, & Catanio 2014).

2.2. Gender Impacts

Research shows that women are more likely to be the targets of both incivility and sexual harassment in the workplace (e.g., Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout 2001). Incivility, gender harassment, and racial harassment have common qualities such as degradation, intimidation, and disrespect for the victim. Cortina (2008) has proposed that when women and people of color are selectively targeted, incivility may represent a covert manifestation of gender or race bias. Cortina had labeled this trend “selective incivility”, conceptualizing it as a place where sexism, racism, and incivility converge. In supporting the theory of selective incivility, Cortina *et al.* (2012) have empirically documented both gender-based and race-based disparities in the experience of uncivil behavior.

Literature on female employees working with other females or for a female boss indicated that women do not have a sense of gender loyalty. Women did not prefer to work for another woman because of the perceptions of the female manager “being high in dominance” which is commonly called “queen bee behavior” in articles written about the phenomenon (Gabriel, Butts, Yuan, Rees, & Sliter 2017; Warning & Buchanan 2009). This is especially true in highly aggressive work climates which show little presence of females in a male dominated environment.

2.3. Social Network Theory and The Incivility Spiral

There is a spiraling effect in the occurrence of bullying in the workplace and therefore incivility in the workplace is showing to be a social network phenomenon. Workplace incivility is not simply between the aggressor and the victim as it occurs in the broader organizational system to include organizational members. Others within the organization who witness this interaction between the two parties are impacted as well. These can be observers, coworkers, clients, customers, members, and third-party intermediaries. Often, the negative impact does not stop at the workplace. The employee that is the victim or is a bystander to the abuse is impacted that he or she brings the distress home with them to family and friends. “Social network theory is built on the idea that individual actions do not occur in isolation separate and unaffected by others or larger social contexts” (Miner *et al.* 2017). This ties into Andersson and Pearson’s 1999 work as they explain organizational decline as “spiral deviation amplifying” where the negative actions of one party leads to a reaction of uncivil behavior and increasing

more counter-incivility until a tipping point is reached. Pouwelse, Mulder, and Mikkelsen's (2018) completed an international overview of the empirical research on workplace bullying and the role of bystanders. They define bystander as "someone who witness bullying and interacts with the other actors in different ways." One area of tension in the literature is in the gender bystander literature as it relates to gender roles and norms; survey findings contrast the idea that females tend to be kind and nurturing and therefore "tend and befriend" another that is experiencing stress. Female instigated behavior contrasts this theory that women provide more empathic behavior than males. So regardless of gender, the researchers work coincide that workplace incivility disrupts workplace norms as well as the mutual respect in the workplace leading to an incivility spiral (Andersson & Pearson 1999; Miner, Diaz, & Smittick 2017).

2.4. Bullying Behaviors

While this is not an absolute list, workplace bullying is often subtle and can include:

- embarrassing or degrading an employee publicly
- intimidating communication: face-to-face, emails, and phone messages
- pitting employees against each other to create a situation of drama
- belittling an employee by acting in a condescending manner
- colluding with others to sabotage the work of an employee
- exclusion from workplace meetings or social events
- spreading rumors and insulting an employee
- removal of work responsibilities and changing the employee's job responsibilities without cause
- withholding important information on purpose

3. The Study and Methodology

This study is relevant to the working world as companies are under a lot of pressure to improve diversity and inclusivity and future employees/leaders (today's students) will eventually be the ones leading the workplaces and