

Project Overview

Introduction

Workplace bullying (WB) refers to “...repeated and unreasonable behaviour directed towards a worker or a group of workers that creates a risk to health and safety”. Workplace bullying presents a risk to workers’ health and safety, potentially negatively affecting the mental and physical health of workers. WB is not a single incident of unreasonable behaviour but refers to repeated and prolonged negative behaviours by one or several others in the workplace, and in which the victim concerned does not manage to defend him/herself against these behaviours. There has been an increasing awareness of the costs, both direct and indirect associated with WB.

Bullying may manifest itself in numerous different ways, from openly abusive behaviours such as verbal abuse, inappropriate remarks at the victim’s expense and unjustified criticism of the person’s work performance, through to behaviours such as social exclusion and rumour mongering. The recent COVID-19 pandemic has seen an increase in the number of workers working from home as isolation and social distancing has extended into the workplace. Whilst it remains unclear how long this form of work will be around, it presents a different environment in which WB may occur.

This review sought to review the evidence associated with individual and organisational risk and protective factors for bullying and the potential effect of the change to working outside the office on workplace bullying.

Methodology

A systematic search of the published literature was undertaken to provide a synthesis of the currently available evidence related to working from home (WFH) and workplace bullying (WB). Searches were performed on the following databases: MEDLINE, Embase, CINAHL, PsycInfo, Business Source Ultimate, ABI/INFORM Complete, Scopus and WHO COVID-19 Research Database. A structured search for grey literature was undertaken involving Australian Government/union websites, key international OHS sites, APO© (Analysis and Policy Observatory) and ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.

Specific questions included:

1. What are the individual and organisational risk and protective factors for bullying?
2. What interventions and protective factors have been shown to decrease the incidence of bullying in the workplace?
3. What is known about experiences of bullying during home-based work periods?
4. In which contexts has bullying during WFH periods increased, decreased or remained the same? Are there differences across industries, countries, etc.?

Results

13,314 evidence reviews were identified and following removal of duplicates and screening a total of 183 papers were included in this review. 26 grey literature documents were identified and screened with a total of 20 included in this review

1. What are the individual and organisational risk and protective factors for bullying?

Most research into risk and protective factors for WB have been limited to observational studies, which have explored antecedents present in the workplace and their association with WB.

Antecedents for WB have been described at individual, group and organisational levels.

Individual factors relate to specific individual worker characteristics, or personality traits, which may present as a risk for WB, either as a perpetrator or victim, or may protect an individual worker from suffering WB. Two specific personality trait groupings that have been explored and linked to WB are described as a) the dark triad (narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy) and b) the big-five personality traits (extraversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, conscientiousness and openness to experience)

Group-level factors include leadership, and intrinsic group differences. Managers and supervisors, have been identified as playing an important role in the development and perpetuation of WB. Abusive supervision, where supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and non-verbal behaviour, such as belittling subordinates, and displaying a forcing style of conflict resolution have been shown to be a risk for WB. Ethical leadership described as respecting the rights, needs and dignity of others and promoting team or organisational interest over self-serving interests and transformational leadership, characterised by leaders who possess

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charisma, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration have been shown to be protective for WB.

Group-based differences, sometimes appear to be the primary reason people are bullied. Workers occupying structural positions associated with little power (related to race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality, or people with visible disabilities, physical illnesses or mental illnesses) are more vulnerable and therefore are at greater risk of WB. Any individual who is unable to integrate into a work group may be used as a scapegoat for tensions within the group.

Organisational culture reflects the norms, values, benefits, communication, quality of life, and the way in which people are developed, nurtured and rewarded at work, whilst organisational climate refers to a contextual situation at a point in time and its link to organisational members' thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Organisational climate appears to be an important risk for WB, as it may condone and reward this behaviour as a way of getting things done (i.e. for harassment to continue, the climate must permit and reward it). WB is more common when the climate is strongly oriented to achieving organisational goals and ignoring employees' wellbeing. In a strong rules climate, where employees were not only expected to comply with existing codes of conduct but also to strictly follow the rules and policies of an organisation, all dimensions of WB have been observed to be affected negatively. A caring climate type was also observed as having a significantly negative effect on physical threats and minimised WB, with the absence of a caring climate able to positively predict risk of physical assaults.

Psychosocial factors, such as stress and occupational risks related to work organisation, such as flexible work methods, role conflict, role ambiguity, monotonous or rotating tasks, high demands, pressure of work, and ambiguity of duties, have been strongly associated with WB.

2. What interventions and protective factors have been shown to decrease the incidence of bullying in the workplace?

Individual-level interventions include training, coaching, psychotherapeutic help and recruitment processes have all been identified as potential interventions to decrease the incidence of bullying in the workplace.

Training in areas such as communication, interpersonal skills, resilience, conflict management and resolution, assertiveness and stress management have been found to assist targets, or potential victims, to manage bullying behaviours better. Training about the nature of bullying, the support mechanisms within and outside the organisation, and the management of bullying cases have also been recommended.

Coaching, a theory-guided, process-oriented and confidential consultation with the goal of further developing professional and personal competencies in the context of professional job requirements, has been recommended for WB victims.

HR practitioners should observe candidates' intrinsic traits, abilities, skills, or psychological states during the selection process to identify traits of workers that either reduce their chances of falling victim to ostracism or equips them to deal with it. Organizations can prefer candidates with buffering traits, skills, abilities, or psychological states during the selection process to minimize costs associated with workplace ostracism.

Group level interventions including leadership selection and training, and organisational development to improve organisational culture, have been recommended to help prevent WB. Other interventions include measures to support the inclusion of a person into the team, such as facilitating employees' access to work-related resources and allowing exchange of information and formation of social networks.

Organisational-level interventions include the introduction of organisational anti-bullying policies and specific guidelines for the prevention of bullying, and for handling complaints and bullying incidents.

3. What is known about experiences of bullying during home-based work periods?

It has been reported that the virtual workplace is more susceptible to workplace incivility, as online team meetings provide ample opportunity for disrespect to thrive, as physical distancing increases the feeling of separation from one another making it even easier to act poorly in an online environment. Targets of incivility are also less able to find social support to cope, making the experience more isolating. Early anecdotal evidence



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from industries using remote work conditions shows that the prevalence of reports of sexual harassment has increased and has found a new space in other forms of communication technology such as WhatsApp® and text messages.

Technology has also enabled WB to take on new forms, many of which may be harder to identify as WB. Virtual communication provides a degree of anonymity that may embolden potential harassers, and there are more channels of communication, including more one-on-one exchanges, which can make it more difficult for managers to observe everything that happens. The combination of the pandemic and mobile technology has created a 24/7 employee experience for many workers, blurring the lines between work and life. Longer workdays and the extension of the workday into evening hours increase the risk for virtual WB by increasing exposure. Technological ability by the perpetrator or limited technology ability by the target can result in victim perceptions of powerlessness, as they are unable to force a perpetrator to remove abusive material or cannot influence what others write about them.

The evidence however remains equivocal with one study finding that the frequency of remote work was not significantly related to either organisational ostracism or cyberbullying, and another study finding that whilst newly starting working from home was a significant predictor for adverse mental health outcomes, it was found to be a preventive factor against WB.

4. In which contexts - if any - has bullying during WFH periods increased, decreased or remained the same? Are there differences across industries, countries, etc.?

Whilst it has been reported that the incidence of WB has increased in relation to WFH since the lockdown period, most of this evidence is from companies involved in the WB resolution process. However, these reports relate specifically to cyberbullying, and it remains unknown if the overall prevalence of WB has decreased, i.e. whether the increase in cyberbullying has matched the decrease in face-to-face bullying.

Across the evidence found, there does not appear to be differences across countries, with the increase in online WB claims/reports covering a range of countries. The most significant change has been the mechanism of bullying, moving from face-to-face WB to cyberbullying.