

The Influence of Actions and Actors on the Perceived Severity of Workplace Bullying

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Workplace bullying is a general form of employee abuse that remains under-researched and unmitigated especially in U.S. firms. In particular, little is known about the factors that influence target perceptions of bullying severity. We present a typology which posits that perceived severity of bullying depends not only on the focus of the bullying behaviors but also the power imbalance between targets and perpetrators. Our results show that subjects perceive person focused bullying behaviors committed by those with formal power to be the most severe form of workplace bullying.

INTRODUCTION

Half of all working Americans have either witnessed or experienced one or more forms of mistreatment at work (Institute, 2007). This has sparked a burgeoning interest in a number of similar constructs including workplace bullying (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003), emotional abuse (Keashly, Trott, & MacLean, 1994), incivility (Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001; Pearson, Andersson, & Porath, 2005), abusive supervision (Tepper et al., 2009), social undermining (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002), sexual harassment (Knapp, Faley, Ekeber, & DuBois, 1997), and aggression (Baron & Neuman, 1998; Hershcovis et al., 2007). Our study focuses on workplace bullying, which occurs frequently in the workplace and poses serious consequences for individuals and organizations (Einarsen, 2000).

Workplace bullying includes an array of intentionally malicious verbal (e.g., crude remarks and threats) and non-verbal (e.g., sabotaging or stealing work output) behaviors that increase in cruelty over a six-month or longer duration (Einarsen et al., 2003). These behaviors are aimed at a specific target within the organization by one or more perpetrators with whom the target perceives there is a power disparity (Branch, Ramsay & Barker, 2007). While there is a burgeoning literature on bullying that includes the study of frequency (Zapf, Einarsen, Hoel, & Vartia, 2003) and target outcomes (Einarsen, Hoel, & Notelasers, 2009), little has been done to investigate the severity of bullying and how that impacts the target's interpretation and response to the situation. The present study seeks to address this gap and contribute to the explication of the bullying construct. We build on the work of Escartin, Rodriguez-

Carballeira, Zapf, Porrua & Martin-Pena (2009) and broaden the dimension of bullying severity to include the power relationship between the perpetrator and target.

Workplace bullying is characterized by its intensity, frequency, and duration as well as the perceived imbalance in power between target and perpetrator. The intensity of bullying refers to the escalating mixture of bullying behaviors targets experience, bullying frequency to the fact that bullying behaviors tend to occur regularly (usually weekly or more often), and the duration of bullying to the length of the bullying episode (usually six or more months) (Hoel, Fargher, & Cooper, 2004; Leymann, 1990; Zapf, Knorz & Kulla, 1996). Finally, the power disparity that characterizes workplace bullying refers to target perceptions of the power imbalance with perpetrators, which can be either be formal (e.g., between supervisors and their subordinates) or informal (e.g., between coworkers) (Branch, Ramsay, & Barker, 2007).

Evidence from the sexual harassment, incivility, aggression, and conflict resolution literatures is particularly instructive about the importance of examining target perceptions of bullying severity. For example, Knapp et al. (1997) and Cortina and Magley (2009) reported that target perceptions of the severity of sexually harassing and incivility behaviors influence the type of coping strategy targets adopt. Likewise, Glomb (2002) noted that target perceptions of the severity of aggressive workplace behaviors impact the target's choice of response strategy. Finally, Todor and Owen (1991) found that the choice of a conflict resolution strategy depends in part on the target's perception of the severity of the dispute.

A number of factors similar to those examined in these literatures likely also influence target perceptions of bullying severity. These include, for example, the type and frequency of the behaviors experienced by targets of sexual harassment (Cortina & Magley, 2009), the characteristics of perpetrators and targets of workplace aggression (Baron & Neuman, 1998), and the duration of the incivility episode (Cortina & Magley, 2009). Still others have suggested that bullying severity is influenced by a host of other situational, environmental, and social factors (Beehr & Newman, 1978; Cortina & Magley, 2009; Henagan & Bedeian, 2009).

The limited literature dealing with the severity of workplace bullying has focused primarily on the characteristics of bullying behaviors. For example, Einarsen, Hoel, and Notelaers (2009) define severity on the basis of the frequency with which bullying behaviors are experienced by the target (see also (Einarsen, 2000; Leymann, 1990; Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy, & Alberts, 2007; Rayner & Hoel, 1997). On the other hand, Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy, & Alberts (2007) define severity (i.e., "bullying degree") as a more holistic combination of the duration, intensity, and frequency of the behaviors the target experienced. Both Einarsen et al. (2009) and Lutgen-Sandvik et al. (2007) reported that higher levels of bullying severity were accompanied by higher levels of stress; targets also reported more psychosomatic complaints as well as decreased job satisfaction (see also (Hoel, Faragher, & Cooper, 2004; Leymann & Gustafsson, 1996; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002). Escartin et al. (2009) investigated the specific behaviors committed by perpetrators in their study of perceived severity of bullying. However, the differential impact of bullies at varying organizational levels remains an under-researched aspect of bullying severity.

Our approach to understanding target perceptions of the severity of bullying behaviors is consistent with Lazarus' (1995) social-interactionist model of occupational stress which states that individuals and their environments are mutually dependent forces (Douglas et al., 2008). In the instant case, target responses to threatening environmental stimuli (bullying behaviors) are based in part on how salient or threatening these stimuli are to the target's personal well being or work performance. The target's response may subsequently lead to consequences for the target, perpetrator, and organization. Thus, an examination of some of the individual and organizational factors that threaten the target's personal well being or work performance is a useful approach to better understanding how targets develop their perceptions of bullying behaviors.

IMPORTANT DETERMINANTS OF BULLYING

Focus of Bullying Behaviors (Actions)

Although some disagreement exists with regard to the number and composition of the dimensions that define bullying (Brodsky, 1976; Rayner & Dick, 2004; Richman et al., 1999; Zapf, Knorz, & Kulla, 1996), we propose that bullying behaviors tend to cluster into two broad categories (person and work-focused behaviors) as suggested by Matthiesen and Einarsen (2001). Examples of person focused bullying behaviors include spreading malicious rumors about targets and publicly humiliating, ignoring, or criticizing them. Examples of work focused bullying behaviors include having targets perform meaningless job tasks, denying targets the resources needed to perform their jobs, and sabotaging, destroying or stealing their work output.

Empirical support for the distinction we make between person and work focused bullying behaviors comes from studies that have examined their factor structures (Brodsky, 1976; Rayner & Dick, 2004; Zapf, et al., 1996) and from the counterproductive workplace behavior literature where typologies of deviant workplace behaviors have been proposed and supported (Robinson & Bennet, 1995). Additional support for the person/work distinction we make comes from the conflict literature where both relationship conflict and work conflict have been shown to differentially affect team performance and team member satisfaction (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). Thus, we posit that bullying behaviors will be either person or work focused.

H1: Bullying behaviors will converge on two factors: person focused and work focused.

The limited research about target perceptions of bullying severity is inconclusive. For example, Einarsen et al. (2009) reported that work focused bullying was associated with an increase in the number of target health complaints while person focused bullying was not, and Hoel et al. (2004) reported that targets of work focused bullying reported more mental health problems than targets exposed to person focused bullying. Conversely, Escartin et al. (2009) found that emotional abuse was considered to be the most severe form of bullying.

We concur with Escartin et al. (2009) and hypothesize that targets will perceive person focused to be more severe than work focused bullying. We use Terror Management Theory (TMT; (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986) to support our argument. According to the tenets of TMT, self-esteem has a powerful impact on an individual's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors; it helps individuals buffer their existential anxieties and fears in order to more effectively manage their psychological health (Pyszczynski & Cox, 2004). As such, self-esteem plays a crucial role in our use of TMT to better explain differences in the perceived severity of person and work focused bullying.

Of particular importance to our application of TMT to workplace bullying are the relationships between self-esteem and how others value who we are (social acceptance) and what we achieve (our accomplishments). As noted by Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Soloman, Arndt, & Schimel (2004), "being valued by others is an important indicator that one is indeed valuable" (p. 484). It should be no surprise, then, that the amount of self-esteem individuals possess can be influenced by their supervisors' and coworkers' actions, communications, and subtle messages (Lord, Brown, & Freiberg, 1999).

The relative strength of these two relationships is also important to our use of TMT to better understand the perceived severity of workplace bullying. For example, the TMT literature suggests that the relationship between self-esteem and social acceptance is stronger than the relationship between self-esteem and accomplishments: that is, how others view who we are is more important to us than how others view what we achieve (Schimel, Arndt, Pyszczynski, & Greenberg, 2001).

The intrinsic self-esteem derived from who we are (social acceptance) rather than the extrinsic self-esteem derived from what we achieve (accomplish) provides the maximum protection against the existential anxieties and fears that can devastate our psychological health (Schimel et al., 2001). Thus, bullying that attacks the target's social and personal relationships (i.e., is person focused) should be more devastating than bullying that attacks the target's accomplishments (i.e., is work focused).

Person focused bullying can also include physically aggressive behaviors that threaten the target's sense of personal safety (Einarsen, et al., 2009; Leymann, 1990). According to Leymann (1990), targets of physically aggressive person focused behaviors experience a heightened sense of fear or "psychological terror". This implies that these targets are not able to manage threats to their personal safety as well as they manage those associated with either work focused or less threatening person focused bullying behaviors. We suggest that targets of person focused bullying might rightfully say to themselves, "I can get another job, but I can't get another me." Thus, we posit that targets will perceive person focused bullying behaviors to be more severe than work focused bullying behaviors.

H2: Person focused bullying behaviors will be perceived to be more severe than work focused bullying behaviors.

Power Disparity Between Target and Perpetrator (Actors)

The power disparity between target and perpetrator is another important characteristic of workplace bullying. As suggested by (Einarsen, et al., 2003), target perceptions of bullying severity may depend more on the power inherent in the organizational status of the perpetrator than on the actual negative behaviors experienced by the target. Perpetrators can withhold access to important work-related information, tools, and other resources that can seriously jeopardize the target's work performance. Perpetrators can also act as "social gatekeepers" who restrict the ability of targets to obtain needed social support as well as form positive personal relationships, both of which can help targets better regulate their psychological equanimity (Leymann & Gustafsson, 1996; Pyszczynski & Cox, 2004). Although both person and work focused bullying can result in deleterious implications for targets and their organizations, these implications are magnified when the perpetrator has formal power over the target.

For example, Tepper et al. (2009) reported that subordinates of supervisors who abused their power and status experienced more job dissatisfaction, less organizational commitment, and higher levels of workplace deviance. Likewise, Cortina and Magley (2009) found that incivility committed by supervisors was considered more negative by targets than the same incivility committed by coworkers, and Penhaligon, Louis, & Restubog (2009) noted that targets who were mistreated by an important member of the organization (e.g., a supervisor) reported they experienced increased depression and lowered self-esteem. Finally, when Duffy et al. (2002) compared social undermining by supervisors and coworkers, they found that social undermining by supervisors led to significantly lower target self-efficacy and organizational commitment. Targets of supervisory social undermining were also involved in a significantly higher number of counterproductive workplace behaviors and reported significantly more somatic complaints than targets of social undermining by coworkers.

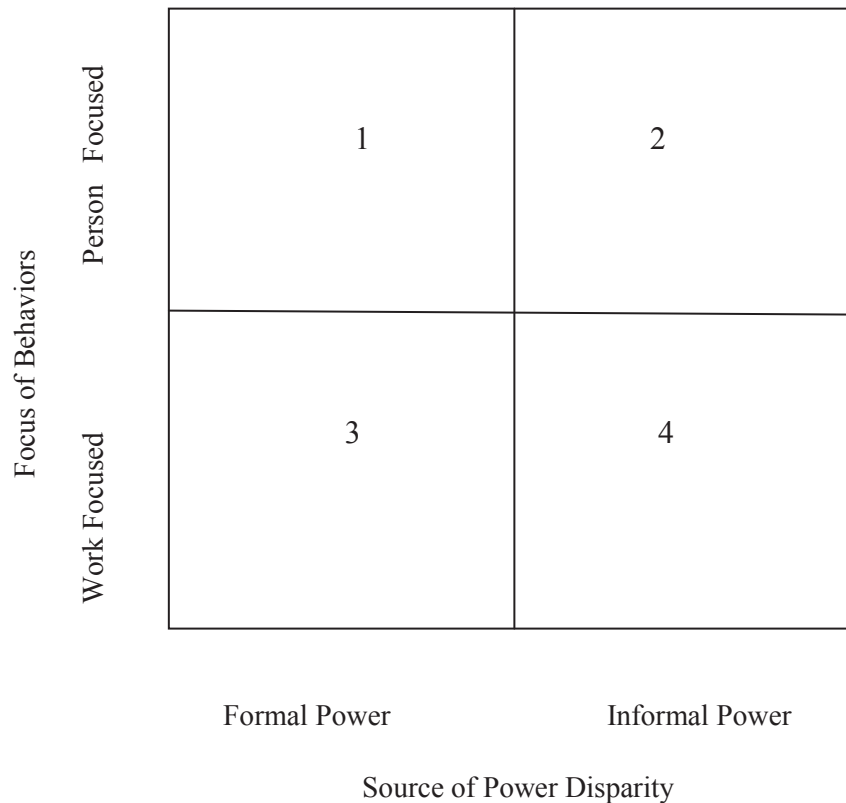
We posit that when the source of the power disparity is formal (i.e., institutionally established, such as between supervisor and subordinate) targets will perceive the same bullying behaviors to be more severe than when the power disparity is informal (i.e., personally established, such as between coworkers).

H3: Bullying behaviors committed by a perpetrator with formal power over the target will be perceived as more severe than the same bullying behaviors committed by a perpetrator with informal power over the target.

Typology of Bullying Severity

Figure 1 illustrates a typology of bullying severity dependent on both the focus of the bullying behaviors (actions) and the status of the perpetrators (actors). The quadrants are numbered in decreasing order of expected severity.

FIGURE 1
TYPOLOGY OF PERCEIVED SEVERITY OF BULLYING BEHAVIORS BASED ON
BOTH THE FOCUS OF PERPETRATOR BEHAVIORS (ACTIONS) AND SOURCE OF
PERPETRATOR-TARGET POWER DISPARITY (ACTORS)



Quadrants 1 and 2 reflect person focused bullying by perpetrators with formal and informal power, respectively, over the target. These quadrants reflect bullying behaviors committed by supervisors/coworkers (respectively) that are intended to compromise the target’s personal well being by attacking either the target personally or the target’s social networks and other personal support systems. As noted above, proponents of TMT would argue these attacks devastate the target’s self-esteem, which compromises the target’s ability to regulate their psychological equanimity. Examples of person focused bullying behaviors include ridiculing and humiliating the target publicly, pushing, grabbing or throwing things at the target (which can threaten the target’s personal safety), or excluding the target from social and other events important to building personal support systems.

The power sources of perpetrators found in Quadrants 3 and 4 are, respectively, the same as those described above in Quadrants 1 and 2, but the bullying behaviors represented by Quadrants 3 and 4 are intended to compromise the target’s work performance. These behaviors are meant to increase the target’s job dissatisfaction, which can lead targets to transfer to another work area, take a leave of absence, or otherwise attempt to distance themselves physically from the perpetrator – or quit. Examples of work focused bullying behaviors include assigning meaningless work to the target, withholding essential work-related information from the target, creating falsified records of poor performance, and sabotaging/stealing the target’s work output.

We posit that the perceived severity of the bullying behaviors within each of the four quadrants of our proposed typology will be significantly different from one another in the order that we hypothesize below.

H4: The mean perceived severity of the bullying behaviors within each quadrant will differ significantly across quadrants, from most (H4a) to least (H4d) severe:

H4a: Person focused bullying behaviors committed by a perpetrator with formal power will be perceived as the most severe. (quadrant 1)

H4b: Person focused bullying behaviors committed by a perpetrator with informal power will be perceived as the second-most severe. (quadrant 2)

H4c: Work focused bullying behaviors committed by a perpetrator with formal power will be perceived as the third-most severe. (quadrant 3)

H4d: Work focused bullying behaviors committed by a perpetrator with informal power will be perceived as the least severe. (quadrant 4)

METHOD

Instrument Development

Although a number of instruments have been developed to measure the frequency of workplace bullying, none have been used to examine the accuracy of the typology we propose. As such, we necessarily developed our own instrument.

Forty-six behavioral items were culled from the Interpersonal Workplace Events Index (Keashly, et al., 1994) and the Inventory of Negative Behaviors (Fox & Stallworth, 2005). Nine reviewers with a wide range of work experiences independently classified the items as either person focused or work focused. The reviewers were also asked to rank the items from least to most severe. Several items were either rewritten or replaced as a result of this process.

The resulting survey instrument was pilot-tested in two stages using different groups of undergraduate-student respondents (n= 46 and n= 68) enrolled in the business college of a large midwestern university. After the first stage, several items were rewritten or replaced. The second stage of the pilot-testing process resulted in a final-survey instrument composed of 18 items: three person focused bullying behaviors by supervisors and the same three person focused bullying behaviors by coworkers; three work focused bullying behaviors by supervisors and the same three work focused bullying behaviors by coworkers; two work focused bullying behaviors by supervisors that couldn't be done by coworkers (included for exploratory purposes); and four positive workplace behaviors (as credibility checks). The bullying items included in the final-survey instrument are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1
ITEMS INCLUDED IN THE FINAL-SURVEY INSTRUMENT

Scale*	Item
PS/PC	Your supervisor/coworker repeatedly spreads hateful and malicious rumors about your personal life.
PS/PC	Your supervisor/coworker repeatedly makes aggressive or intimidating physical gestures such as pushing, slamming objects, finger pointing, or glaring towards you.
PS/PC	Your supervisor/coworker repeatedly yells at you, singles you out for angry outbursts, and directs temper tantrums at you for no apparent reason.
WS/WC	Your supervisor/coworker repeatedly and intentionally sabotages or steals your tools, equipment, supplies, or work output.
WS/WC	Your supervisor/coworker repeatedly withholds or refuses to provide information that you must have in order to perform your job successfully.

WS/WC	Your supervisor/coworker repeatedly and purposely excludes you from meetings that you need to attend in order to perform your job successfully.
WS	Your supervisor repeatedly and unfairly threatens you with termination or other negative job consequences for no apparent reason.
WS	Your supervisor repeatedly makes unreasonable work demands of you.
Credibility check – Person Focused	Your supervisor/coworker routinely greets you in a pleasant and friendly manner whenever you run into one another during the workday.
Credibility check – Work Focused	Your supervisor/coworker routinely asks for and acknowledges your input on work-related matters.

* Scale to which the bullying behavior belongs:

WS – Work focused behaviors perpetrated by a supervisor

WC – Work focused behaviors perpetrated by a coworker

PS – Person focused behaviors perpetrated by a supervisor

PC – Person focused behaviors perpetrated by a coworker

In the final survey instrument workplace bullying was defined as “intentional and repeated, long-term behavior that is offensive, intimidating, abusive, and humiliating”. Respondents were instructed to “Assume that you are the employee in each situation and that the situation has gone on for over six months.” Question stems were phrased as “Your supervisor/coworker (sic) repeatedly (commits the specified behavior).”

The 18 items for the final version of the survey were randomly ordered into two blocks, one block for each perpetrator (a supervisor or coworker). Four versions of the survey were created, with blocks of items presented in varying orders to control for ordering and other unwanted systematic effects (Popovich, Licata, Nokovich, Martelli, & Zoloty, 1986). Note that two work focused bullying behaviors that could be committed by supervisors only were added to the survey to better understand the effect of both perpetrator status and the focus of bullying behaviors on target perceptions of bullying severity. Finally, respondents were asked whether they had experienced each of the behaviors in the survey at work.

Sample

The final eighteen-item instrument was administered to 299 undergraduate and graduate business students at a large midwestern university as well as 220 working adults from local companies (43 percent were practitioners participating in continuing education and professional development activities and 57 percent were participants in a company-sponsored managerial training program). Prior research in severity perceptions has shown that perceptions do not differ based upon study participants’ experience with a phenomenon (Escartin, et al., 2009).

Because the sample was composed of three diverse sub-samples (students and two groups of working adults), we examined the data using multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to determine whether there were significant mean differences in the perceived severity of bullying severity across the three sub-samples. The results of this analysis revealed no significant difference across the samples (Hotelling’s criterion, $F[14,1022] = 1.43, p = .131$). Therefore, the three sub-samples were collapsed into a single sample for all subsequent data analyses. Moreover, although thirty-seven percent of study respondents reported having experienced at their workplace at least one of the bullying behaviors included in the survey, we found no significant difference in the perceived severity of respondents’ who experienced bullying at their workplace and those who did not (Hotelling’s criterion, $F[5, 463] = .763, p = .577$).

Independent and Dependent Variables

Independent variables. As noted above, the power disparity between target and perpetrator was operationalized based on the organizational status of the perpetrator (i.e., whether the perpetrator was a supervisor or a coworker); the bullying behaviors were either person focused or work focused.

Dependent variable. Respondents were asked whether each behavior was an example of workplace bullying based on the definition of bullying described above. For each behavior they endorsed as workplace bullying, respondents were asked to rate the severity of the behavior using a nine-point Likert-type scale that ranged from 1 (*not at all severe*) to 9 (*as severe as it gets*).

Averaging the severity scores of relevant items created eight perceived severity scale scores. The inter-rater reliabilities of all scales are considered acceptable for instruments developed and used in basic research (Nunnally, 1978). The work focused scale score was the mean of the 6 relevant work focused bullying behaviors (committed by both supervisors and coworkers) ($\alpha = .875$); the person focused scale score was the mean of the 6 person focused bullying behaviors (committed by both supervisors and coworkers) ($\alpha = .843$). The supervisor scale score was the mean of the 6 supervisor bullying behaviors (both person and work focused behaviors) ($\alpha = .831$); the coworker scale was the mean of the 6 coworker bullying behaviors (both person and work-focused behaviors) ($\alpha = .832$). Perceived severity scale scores were also created for each of the four quadrants of the proposed typology of bullying behaviors. These scale scores included the mean of the 3 person focused bullying behaviors committed by a supervisor ($\alpha = .695$); the mean of the 3 person focused behaviors committed by a coworker ($\alpha = .747$); the mean of the 3 work focused bullying behaviors committed by a supervisor ($\alpha = .784$); and the mean of the 3 work focused bullying behaviors committed by a coworker ($\alpha = .829$).

Results

The mean and standard deviation for each of the 12 supervisor and coworker matching bullying behaviors included in the final survey instrument are shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2
MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS ARRANGED BY SCALE

Bullying Behaviors	Scale*	Mean**	Std. Dev.
Supervisor hateful/malicious rumors	PS	7.72	1.481
Supervisor aggressive physical gestures	PS	7.48	1.738
Supervisor yells/angry outbursts	PS	7.14	1.728
Coworker hateful/malicious rumors	PC	7.16	3.671
Coworker aggressive physical gestures	PC	7.15	1.832
Coworker yells/angry outbursts	PC	6.36	2.069
Supervisor sabotages/steals work	WS	6.63	2.183
Supervisor withholds information	WS	6.10	2.312
Supervisor excludes you from meetings	WS	6.03	2.351
Coworker sabotages/steals work	WC	6.33	2.156
Coworker withholds information	WC	5.56	2.471
Coworker excludes you from meetings	WC	5.43	2.371
Supervisor Only Work Focused Items:			
Supervisor threatens you with termination for no apparent reason		7.65	4.308
Supervisor makes unreasonable work demands of you		3.45	2.937

* Scale to which the bullying behavior belongs:

WS – Work focused behaviors perpetrated by a supervisor

WC – Work focused behaviors perpetrated by a coworker

PS – Person focused behaviors perpetrated by a supervisor

PC – Person focused behaviors perpetrated by a coworker

** Mean perceived severity rated using a Likert-type scale from 1 = “not at all severe” to 9 = “as severe as it gets”.

Hypothesis One posited that the bullying behaviors would be either person or work focused. A principal components analysis with varimax rotation (see Table 3) yielded two discernable factors (person focused and work focused behaviors) with eigenvalues greater than 1 and factor loadings of .50 or better (Zwick & Velicer, 1986). The two factors cumulatively accounted for 57.22% of the variance explained. Therefore, Hypothesis One was supported.

Hypothesis Two posited that person focused bullying behaviors would be perceived by respondents as more severe than work focused bullying behaviors. A paired comparison t-test was used to compare the mean severity of the six person focused behaviors committed by either a supervisor or coworker with the mean severity of the six work focused behaviors committed by either a supervisor or coworker. Test results supported Hypothesis Two. The mean difference between person focused (7.15) and task focused (5.96) behaviors was -1.19 and the 95% confidence interval was between -1.308 and -1.068. The effect size was large ($d=.78$). A paired t-test showed that the mean severity of person focused bullying behaviors was significantly greater than the mean severity of work focused bullying behaviors ($t = -19.416$, $df = 518$, $p < .000$, two-tailed).

Hypothesis Three posited that bullying behaviors committed by a supervisor would be perceived as more severe than the same bullying behaviors committed by a coworker. A paired comparison t-test was used to compare the mean severity of the same six person and work focused bullying behaviors committed by a supervisor and by a coworker. Test results supported Hypothesis Three. The mean difference between supervisor committed behaviors (6.59) and coworker committed behaviors (6.32) was .26 and the 95% confidence interval was between .172 and .349. The effect size was small ($d=.17$). A paired t-test showed that the mean severity of supervisor committed bullying behaviors was significantly greater than the mean severity of coworker committed bullying behaviors ($t = 5.788$, $df = 518$, $p < .000$, two-tailed).

Finally, Hypothesis Four posited that the mean severity scores for each of the four quadrants of our typology would be significantly different from one another in a decreasing order of perceived severity. A series of paired comparison t-tests with Bonferroni correction were conducted to compare the mean perceived severity scores across the four quadrants. All t-tests were statistically significant and were in the order we hypothesized. Test results are reported in Table 3.

TABLE 3
RESULTS OF T-TESTS

Variables and means	Mean Difference	99% Confidence Interval	t statistic	Effect size	Degrees of Freedom	p value (two tailed)
Work Supervisor (6.25) and Work Coworker (5.79)	.46	.31 to .62	7.621	.24	511	.000
Work Supervisor (6.25) and Person Supervisor (7.45)	-1.20	-1.37 to -.99	-16.24	.74	514	.000
Work Supervisor (6.25) and Person Coworker (6.85)	.60	-.817 to -.38	-7.13	.34	515	.000
Work Coworker (5.79) and Person Supervisor (7.45)	1.65	-1.19 to -1.44	-20.76	.99	513	.000
Work Coworker (5.79) and Person Coworker (6.85)	-1.06	-1.26 to -.86	-13.65	.59	514	.000
Person Supervisor (7.45) and Person Coworker (6.85)	.60	.47 to .72	12.30	.41	517	.000

DISCUSSION

Our results demonstrate that perceptions of the severity of workplace bullying are dependent on both the focus of workplace bullying behaviors (actions) and the power disparity between targets and perpetrators (actors). We believe this is a meaningful contribution to the bullying literature.

Influence of Focus of Bullying Behaviors (Actions)

Our factor analytic results support two distinct categories of bullying behaviors (person and work focused behaviors) as suggested by Matthiesen & Einarsen (2001). We also show that respondent perceptions of bullying severity are influenced by whether bullying behaviors are person or work focused. Our findings support those in Escartin, et al's (2009) study and confirm the importance of the focus of bullying behavior on perceptions of severity.

As noted above, we believe that our findings can be partially attributed to the differences in the nature and strength of the relationships between self-esteem and social acceptance and self-esteem and accomplishments. For example, it is the intrinsic self-esteem derived from social acceptance (who we are) rather than the extrinsic self-esteem derived from our accomplishments (what we achieve) that best protects targets from the devastating loss of their self-esteem (Schimmel et al., 2001). This is consistent with our respondents' perceptions that person focused bullying behaviors are more severe than work focused bullying behaviors. Nonetheless, even the intrinsic self-esteem derived from social acceptance can be effectively devastated by a relentless campaign of person focused bullying.

An alternative explanation of these results may be that targets of work focused bullying can distance themselves psychologically from their work performance better than targets of person focused bullying can distance themselves from the image they hold of their personal self-worth (Wilson & Gilbert, 2008). Employees simply may expect that their work performance will be challenged and attacked by others, and thus employees are neither surprised nor terribly upset when this occurs. For example, coworkers constantly compete among themselves for important organizational rewards (e.g., merit pay and promotions), and they may believe they can create an "edge" by sabotaging their coworkers' performance. The fact that the exploratory work focused bullying behavior included in Table 2 about a supervisor's unreasonable work demands was rated the least severe bullying behavior in the survey also suggests that demanding supervisors may be perceived as part of "business as usual" in the workplace.

Influence of Organizational Status of Perpetrators (Actors)

Little prior research has directly addressed the impact of perpetrator status on target perceptions of bullying behaviors (Bruk-Lee & Spector, 2006; Cortina & Magley, 2009; Keashly, et al., 1994). Our results show that targets perceive bullying behaviors perpetrated by supervisors to be more severe than the same behaviors perpetrated by coworkers. Although this result was not unexpected, it confirms once again that the power wielded by supervisors is perceived to exceed the power wielded by coworkers: the capricious flagrant abuse of supervisory power is perceived to be a very severe form of bullying. Interestingly, Tepper et al. (2009) report that targets subjected to flagrant supervisory abuse often respond by committing deviant acts themselves. This can have deleterious consequences for targets, perpetrators, and the organization.

Typology of Bullying Severity

The hypotheses related to the four quadrants of our typology of bullying severity were supported by our results: target perceptions of bullying severity were dependent on both the power disparity between target and perpetrator (i.e., formal or informal) and the focus of the bullying behaviors (i.e., person or work focused). Moreover, these results were in the order that we hypothesized. This is likely to be the case especially if the bullying includes person focused behaviors that attack the target's personal safety or involve the capricious misuse of supervisory power (Einarsen, et al., 2009; Leymann, 1990).

STUDY LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Certain limitations in this study should be recognized. The use of single source survey data utilizing a newly developed instrument may limit comparability to previous studies using different instruments. Caution should be used in generalizing these findings to other studies.

The results of our study suggest some interesting and exciting avenues of future research, including a more complete elaboration of the determinants and consequences of bullying severity. We believe that TMT (particularly the type and nature of the relationships TMT would posit between self-esteem and person and work focused bullying behaviors) has the potential to help us better understand workplace bullying. As noted above, these relationships explain well why our respondents' perceived person focused to be more severe than work focused bullying behaviors.

There are a number of other intriguing questions about workplace bullying that can be better understood based on the critical role that self-esteem appears to play in the bullying process. These include whether perpetrators deliberately seek out targets with low self-esteem, perhaps because these targets are more easily bullied. We also believe that it is important to establish whether targets high in intrinsic self-esteem are better able to defend against bullying that focuses on the target's personal well-being and even more so against attacks on the target's work performance. Finally, it may well be that as perpetrators devastate a target's self-esteem they increase their own as if it were a "rush" (i.e., there is a negative reciprocal relationship between the self-esteem of targets and perpetrators). If this were proven true, it would likely help explain the escalation effect that is an important component of the bullying process (Einarsen et al., 2003).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Our results suggest that bullying severity is an important (and somewhat complex) component of workplace bullying that affects a host of important individual, organizational, and social outcomes. For example, we know that workplace bullying increases the job dissatisfaction of targets, which increases the likelihood that targets will leave their organizations (McCormack, Casimir, Djurkovic, & Yang, 2009). We also know that this also applies to bystanders who witness workplace bullying. For example, it has been reported that employees who witness bullying are significantly more likely to exhibit work performance that is better than actual targets but worse than those who have not witnessed bullying (Meglich-Sespico, Faley, & Knapp, 2007). And Rayner and Keashly (2004) report that the annual replacement cost alone for bullying-related turnover in a firm with 1000 employees would be \$1.4 million (in 2010 US dollars).

Because targets are likely to respond to workplace bullying based in part on their perceptions of the severity of the bullying they experience, it is in the best interests of organizations to understand the major determinants of those perceptions. Organizations must also realize that just because there are no complaints does not mean that bullying doesn't exist in their workplaces. Training both human resource professionals and line managers to better recognize the antecedents of workplace bullying can help identify and mitigate a multitude of related negative organizational outcomes.

Thus, organizations should develop specific, formal policies, procedures, and practices for both reporting and redressing workplace bullying, regardless of whether it is reported by targets or bystanders (Meglich-Sespico, et al., 2007). Organizations should look to the policies, procedures and practices they developed to remedy sexual harassment in their workplaces for guidance. Particular attention should be paid to training supervisors in interpersonal skills to reduce the possibility of bullying by those in power.

Although an increasing number of organizations have developed formal policies that prohibit workplace bullying, some bullying behaviors are nonetheless difficult to investigate and remedy. For example, the source of salacious rumors or mean-spirited jokes can be particularly difficult to discover. Training programs and policy enforcement should focus on creating and maintaining a professional, respectful work environment that fosters harmonious working relationships.

A broader and deeper knowledge of the individual, organizational, and social determinants and consequences of perceived severity of workplace bullying could help firms better understand why it is in their best interests to develop and implement effective strategies to prevent new as well as remedy existing workplace bullying.

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