Who gets Bullied at Work?

The role of Emotion Stability, Psychological Flexibility, and Coping in Workplace Bullying.

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Introduction: Bullying is costly for individuals and their workplaces. Considerable research has explored the incidence and prevalence of bullying in the workplace and the negative consequences to individuals and organizations. Few studies, however, have considered the individual characteristics of adults who are bullied in the workplace.

Methods: This study investigated personality traits, psychological flexibility, and coping styles which might contribute to victimization in workplaces including higher education. Participants were adults, between the ages of 18-65, who were currently working or had been in the workforce. Of 419 participants recruited using an online survey, 299 answered yes to being bullied as a child or in the workplace (71.6% at work and 46% as a child). The remaining 120 participants dropped out without answering. 186 participants who had experienced bullying (75% at work and 25% as a child) proceeded to complete the entire study. The final distribution consisted of 75% females and 25% males, with the majority (26.5%) between the ages of 36-45 and 70% reporting tertiary education level (i.e., over 16 years of education). Recruitment was via the James Cook University newsletter and posters, email invitations to health clinics and organizations, Facebook, and the Australian Psychological Society website.

Snowballing techniques were also used.

Results: A standard multiple regression showed that experiencing bullying as a child (p = 0.004), gender (p = 0.001), and neuroticism (p = 0.017) were significant predictors of bullying in the workplace (F(3,158) = 4.43, p < 0.05), explaining 16.6% of the variance. Also, a series of standard multiple regressions found that neuroticism (p = 0.001) was a significant predictor of maladaptive coping (F(3,158) = 16.99, p < 0.001), explaining 43.3% of the variance; and psychological inflexibility in the workplace (F(3,158) = 9.01, p < 0.01), explaining 28.8% of the variance. A hierarchical multiple regression controlling for experiencing bullying as a child, age, and gender showed that maladaptive coping (p = 0.006) was also a significant contributor to bullying in the workplace (F(3,158) = 5.77, p < 0.05), explaining 20.4% of the variance with a unique 3.9%. The majority of participants (49%) reported that being bullied at work did not prevent them from continuing to attend work. After workplace bullying, participants reported trying to resolve the matter (9.7%), making a complaint (9.1%) and doing nothing (7.5%).

Conclusion: Neuroticism is a persistent trait in individuals who are victims of bullying. These individuals are characteristically prone to negative affect and maladaptive coping. While most researchers have attributed bullying to the workplace to absenteeism, recent studies have started to investigate how presenteeism affects the individual and organizations. Presenteeism significantly contributes to loss of productivity. Although employees might choose to go home while being bullied, they are unable to meet previously held standards (i.e., productivity) due to compromised mental health. The higher incidence of neuroticism (which might be expressed as paranoia) amongst participants who reported workplace bullying might also offer a cautious explanation for the dropout rates in the current study. Future directions for effective workplace programs in higher education and research should be considered.