



Unconscious Bullying in the Workplace: A Qualitative Exploration

Original scientific paper

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Abstract

Bullying is an intimidating behavior that can be internalized as a learned behavior. The Study aimed to create thoughtfulness among employees about how and what makes an individual become a bully or engage in bullying with no awareness. The Study explored the view of an employee to understand how unconscious behavior can influence one's actions and behavior toward bullying. This Study practiced a Focus Group Discussion and conducted the discussion virtually on a sample of 31 employees of the Service and Non-Service sectors. The researcher discussed with 11 participants in one group and 20 in another on two different days. This discussion helped to provide awareness about unconsciousness in bullying behavior at the workplace. This discussion helped to gather views of working people from various sectors. It illustrated that focus groups could enhance awareness and empower one's thoughts and beliefs. An important finding can be that the group identified the challenges of Unconscious bullying, like lack of self-awareness, marginal ethical and moral guidance, and eminence. In conclusion, it is observed from the discussion and responses from employees that there is a need to have healthy communication abilities in stating their feelings assertively.

Keywords: *Bullying, Harassment, Unconscious, Assertive, intimidating, and threatening behavior.*

Bullying is a form of aggressive behavior that can be physical, verbal, non-verbal, emotional, or psychological, and manifests various relationship patterns (Swearer & Hymel, 2015). Occupational bullying is the repeated unreasonable action of one person towards another that

threatens another's safety and well-being (The University of Colorado, 2015). An office is a place where a group of employees works. Essentially, it is an environment that deals with the psychological aspects of a company's organization and its employees' well-being. Individual job characteristics

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of an employee are the task itself is the key to motivation. Unconscious bullying occurs when an individual is not aware that their behavior is unacceptable. Therefore, it cannot be considered deliberate but needs management awareness (Fraser, R., 2020).

Hackman and Oldham (1980) state that job motivation is affected by skill variety, job identity, job significance, autonomy, and feedback. Each employee experiences high motivation and job satisfaction due to the core job characteristics. Employees require or desire growth and self-esteem, i.e., self-actualization, as one of their characteristics (Shelstad Jeff, 2012). The significance of the task and the identity of the task/role cause employees to use strength and power that hurt frail people. Subtle bullying among employees, such as manipulation, exclusion, spreading of rumors, intimidation, mistreatment, blame games, and so forth would be experienced in the work environment (Rajalakshmi & Gomathi, 2015).

Studies show that bullying was associated with decreased cortex thickness in the medial, lateral, and temporal pre-frontals mediating the relationship between bullying behavior in childhood and anti-social behavior. The rise in the cortisol level, especially in the hippocampus, helps in short-term and long-term memory processes, making learning difficult for children. The result also shows reduced sleep quality due to disturbing thoughts and reflections. This lack of sleep occurs due to the hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis produced by Stress. Sleep-deprived bullying perpetrators and victims tend to have more negative emotional states like fatigue, tension, anxiety, depression, and negligence when performing tasks, especially during study time (Okhotan et al., 2020).

Purpose of the Study

The study aims to create understanding among employees about how and what makes an individual become a bully or engage in bullying activities without awareness and self-consciousness.

Objectives

1. To differentiate the terms Bullying and Harassment to the group members
2. To provide awareness of bullying and its unconscious behavior
3. To empower group members to unravel the organization's appropriate behavior

Theoretical Framework

Aggression and Passive-aggression can be two styles of interpersonal communication that influence an employee to bully. Through the psychodynamic perspective (Sigmund Freud), humans naturally possess two basic instincts Eros (life instincts) that drive survival instincts and Thanatos (death instincts) that drive aggression as behavior. Freud says Anxiety is a state of tension that motivates humans to perform and finish a task. Individuals use defense mechanisms to cope with or protect their ego (THE WORLD OF REALITY) (Corey G, 2017). Some of the defense mechanisms used by employees are projection, passive aggression, acting out, isolation, devaluation, autistic fantasies, denial, displacement, dissociation, splitting, rationalization, and somatization (Barabasz, 2016).

Albert Bandura's (1977) Social Psychological experiment on Aggression, correction, and learned behavior can reflect on corporate bullying (P Hollis, 2019). Behaviorists believe that punishment is the way to the growth of the employee and the organization. Though there is a substantial emotional and physical disturbance created due to bullying, the bullier believes that there is an escalation in mental and self-esteem (George, 2011). The individual who witnesses the aggressive behavior of bullies is likely to repeat the behavior, which yields a positive outcome. Thus, when no consequences or negative impacts affect the aggressor or bullies, the bullying behavior is continuous, and bystanders or victims learn to accept the aggression and bullying behavior as a normal lifestyle (P Hollis, 2019). Bullying becomes normalized as long as no intervention is enforced to the hierarchy that withheld power.

Bullying often starts in childhood when adults or parents oppress the younger ones' opinions or feelings, adversely impacting mental health. During a child's formative years, social interest motivates behavior. Alfred Adler states, "A human being does not exist for himself alone. He is

not apart from others". Social identity within peer relationships is crucial to maintain and improve positive psychological health. One who feels the 'need to belong' becomes more well-adjusted than one who does not. Henceforth, there must be a balance between belonging, self-identity, and superiority. People engage in bullying or aggressive or manipulative behavior to satisfy their desire for power and protect themselves from an inferiority complex from a peer (Henderson et al., 2018). Adler talked about inferiority and superiority feelings. Children in their school face difficulty in adjusting. More attention must be given to entitlement and encouraging the children's creativity and initiatives. Children who lack this would strive for superiority rather than cooperation with peers. As a result, there is a chance of an inferiority complex (fed the social disconnection). The perception of inferiority fuels what Adler called the "superiority complex," which protects against feelings of inferiority yet contributes to a flight from reality and, ultimately, social deviation (McCluskey, 2021).

An oscillation between self-hatred and grandiosity clinically characterizes this inferiority and superiority. In addition, the rhetoric and bullying prevalent in current society demonstrate the destructive nature of the inferiority and superiority complex. To overcome inferiority, Adler used the terms lifestyle, life goal, fantasy goal, and guiding fiction interchangeably (McCluskey, 2021). Providing detailed feedback on the children's creativity or action and behavior, teaching empathy, and favoring authoritative parenting (rather than submissive or authoritarian parenting) with crucial elements of nurturing, responsiveness, and generating genuine support to children. Controlling children by expressing excellent and bad actions and consequences; creating mutual rules – explain and discuss the reasoning.

Furthermore, it has become evident that there is more to a psychosocial work environment than descriptive job characteristics and that the social ties that connect different employees to their jobs are essential. Exchanging information between individuals to facilitate their actions is considered a Social Capital Theory in an organization. An organization can benefit from capital because it can benefit itself and its members. A high level of social capital

can prevent and develop a bullying buffer. To one extent, it prevents negative or ambiguous actions from being viewed as bullying or as a buffer that facilitates effective conflict resolution. To another extent, exclusion of members of the group/ team/ department/ organization who do not conform to rigid group norms may increase the risk of bullying (Pihl et al., 2017).

In Dominance theory, a variable enables an individual to access resources and gain power in each developmental stage like toys in childhood, sex in adolescence, and power and prestige in their adulthood soon (Faye Mishna, 2012). According to this theory, the central motivating factor is power and dominance, which makes the bully intimidate and humiliate others. According to mechanisms such as oppression, discrimination, and injustice, groups formed from the social hierarchy. They possess positive social values and thus show their power on less powerful groups in that hierarchy. Their social hierarchy group determines a person's social status. Additionally, if the bully leads a clique of admiring followers, these followers may experience heightened power within the classroom due to their position within a group that a robust, respected individual leads (Evans & Smokowski, 2016).

During a working day at the workplace, conflicts will inevitably arise. Conflict, however, is very different from Bullying or Harassment. The term Bullying refers to an unwanted, recurring aggressive behavior that causes psychological and physical harm, creating a power imbalance between the bully and the victim or victims. In contrast, Harassment is unwelcomed intimidating, hostile, or abusive behavior. Harassment usually would be more personal around one or few people than to everyone. Like Bullying, Harassment also creates a power imbalance and creates exceptionally uncomfortable situations in the workplace (Nursiti et al., 2023; Pantry P, 2020).

Method

Focus group discussions are used to gain people's knowledge, perspectives, and attitudes about issues and seek enlightenment for the behavior (Mondal et al., 2019). The FGD in a built environment is a helpful way to gather people from similar backgrounds

or experiences to discuss a specific topic of interest. In the process of gaining qualitative information, FGD acts as a fundamental part of assessing public perception (Omar, 2018).

Sample

The study practiced Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and gathered working employees' views, opinions, and understanding of Bullying and its unconscious aspects with the necessary transformations to be espoused at the workplace or exerted by individuals themselves. The sample of 31 gathered on MS Teams were employees who have more than 4 years of work experience in the service and non-service sectors. The researcher conducted the FGD in two sets with 11 participants in one group and 20 participants in another group for 1 hour on two different days. Researcher Utilize email invitations, flyers posted in IWN and other Common group areas, and internal communication platforms to reach potential participants. Ensure recruitment materials clearly explain the study's purpose, confidentiality, and compensation

The researcher used a self-constructed and semi-structured questionnaire to generate discussion among the employees from service sector and non-service sector employees. The semi-structured questionnaire includes demographic details

in **Table 4**. The data was analyzed employing thematic analysis. The semi-structured interview schedule for the employees was developed by the researcher and subjected to expert validation. Open-ended questions were used to identify the challenges faced by employees at the workplace in understanding bullying, its unconscious aspects, and factors that may help the workplace to be safe and secure.

Discussion

The records from the discussion served the purpose of differentiating the terms Bullying and Harassment and providing awareness of Unconscious aspects of bullying. From the records of FGD, three themes were derived Awareness, challenges or de-mystifying of bullying, and changes required for a safe and secure workplace for employees.

The first theme, derived from Table 1 (Awareness/Empowerment), encompasses three aspects. The first facet addresses the emotional impact of bullying on victims, including intimidation, lack of credit for work, ridicule, disrespect, and power imbalances. These experiences can trigger unconscious emotions like anger, pity, guilt, and resentment, potentially conflicting with objectivity (Cilliers Frans, 2012; Gidi et al., 2023; Goldyne, 2007; Sheila White, 2007).

Table 1.

Themes and aspects derived from Awareness/empowerment on bullying

Awareness/Empowerment on Bullying		
Emotional	Stress Inducing	Situational
Hurting emotions and feeling	Crossing limit	Anger
Not receiving Credits for the work	Not receiving Credits for the work	Frustration
Abusive or intimidating behavior	Grabbing opportunities and credits	Pressure from top-level
Ridiculing other's feelings and views	Granted feelings	Discrimination
Power and position	Taking control	Fun on others
Lack of respect	Spreading Rumors	
	Blame game	

From Table 1, The second aspect pertains to the stress induced by bullying behaviors. Withholding credit for work can lead to both emotional and stress-related consequences. Unaccountability, blame-shifting, disregarding feelings, spreading rumors, and seizing opportunities all contribute to a pressure-filled environment that can lead to employee dissatisfaction, increased anxiety, absenteeism, or a preference for remote work to avoid conflict (Aarestad et al., 2021; Gillen et al., 2017).

The third aspect focuses on situational errors stemming from anger, hierarchical pressure displacement, and discrimination based on gender, education level, or socioeconomic status (Table 1). Lighthearted behavior or sarcasm among colleagues can sometimes overstep boundaries, creating an uncomfortable situation for the target. This form of passive bullying, disguised as fun or

humor, can be particularly toxic (Ahmed et al., 2021; Ho et al., 2022; Lian et al., 2021; Ramya & Kulkarni, 2011; Sheila White, 2007).

Theme 2: Challenges in De-mystifying Bullying

The second theme, central to the FGD's objective, addressed the unconscious aspects of bullying (Table 2). Personality development fundamentally rests on individual responsibility According to (Bargh & Morsella, 2008), behavioral impulses originate unconsciously before being consciously claimed and experienced. This subconscious activity shapes personality and decision-making (“The Influence of Subconscious Mind on Human Behavior,” 2014).

Table 2.
Challenges/ de-mystifying of bullying

Challenges/ Demystifying of Bullying Behavior	
Lack of Self-awareness	reinforcement
Unaware of the situation and setting	learned Behavior from experiences
Pleasure principle	Sarcasm, Joking
Influences from a young age	Low Self-esteem
Control/ Power factor	Not feeling accountable
Too many advice	Gender Socialization
Micromanagement	Hyperactivity
lack of moral or ethical guidance	Displacement of actions
Name and fame	

The FGD analysis (Table 2) revealed that individuals may lack self-awareness and situational awareness, allowing long-held biases and cognitions to influence unconscious judgments (Tslpursky. G, 2020). From a psychodynamic perspective, bullying can stem from the id (personality structure) or eros (life instincts), driven by pleasure-seeking, desire for fame and power, displacement of actions and behaviors (Barabasz, 2016; Cilliers Frans, 2012; Sheila White, 2007).

Socio-cognitive learning theory suggests that bullying behavior can be learned and reinforced through childhood experiences, observing others' behavior, and mimicking observed bullying practices. Additionally, individuals may unconsciously cultivate dominant behavior through excessive advice-giving and micromanagement, fueled by a desire for superiority (Adler, as cited in (McCluskey, 2021)). This "superiority complex" can lead to disconnection and aggression (McCluskey, 2021). Hyperactivity, low self-esteem, lack

of moral or ethical guidance, and reduced accountability can also contribute to diminished self-awareness and negatively impact personality.

Gender socialization, an extreme form of prejudice rooted in societal expectations, can also generate unconscious bias. While some may experience a subtle sense of bias, most people lack the critical self-reflection necessary to identify unconscious biases (Goldyne, 2007). Unchallenged cognitive processes lead to responses influenced by bias or conditioned behavior. As (Jones. D, 2019) states, "Bias is a pre-existing or primed knowledge and beliefs brought to bear on immediate situations and contexts."

Theme 3: Changes Required for a Safe and Secure Workplace

The third theme (Table 3) identified necessary changes for fostering a safe

and secure work environment. The study highlighted the effectiveness of workplace Unconscious Bias Training (UBT) in raising awareness of potentially harmful biases and minimizing their impact on interactions (Atewologun. D et al., 2018). While UBT cannot eliminate unconscious bias, it can reduce its influence on everyday interactions and decision-making. The Implicit Association Test (IAT) serves as a tool for detecting the strength of automatic associations between mental representations (Harvard (OEDIB), 2011; Tonya R. Moon, 2011). The subjects' relationships with different coping reactions could help differentiate between the belief in a just world that is personal and the belief in a just world that is general. According to research on a just world, the more subjects believed in a just world, the less likely they were to describe themselves as victims of discrimination (Dalbert, 1999).

Table 3.

Changes required for a safe and secure workplace

Change required for a safe and secure workplace	
Awareness program on Bullying behaviors	Standing up for oneself
Being Assertive	voicing out when witnessed rather than being a bystander
Accountability for their actions	Practicing Empathy and Gratitude
Mindful about other's reactions and responses	self-introspection, Self-reflection
Controlled behavior	Keen observation into self and other's feelings
Face-to-face communication	Taking self-time
Expressing feelings	Seeking Honest and open feedback

Changes required for a safe and secure workplace

From the discussion Table 3, Drawing on data from Discussion Table 3, employees identified various coping strategies that contribute to personal empowerment and confidence. These strategies include assertiveness, accountability, face-to-face communication, emotional expression, and self-advocacy (Arnetz et al., 2019; Moreira et al., 2019; Rivara & Le Menestrel, 2016; Shorey & Wong, 2021; Silva et al., 2017).

Mindful about responses and reactions from others, controlled behavior, practicing empathy and gratitude, self-introspection, self-reflection, keen observation, having self-time, and seeking open and honest feedback are other changes raised in the discussion from the employees in FGD. This helps employee also develop their level of happiness and improve their standard of living. (Arnetz et al., 2019; Chen & Zhu, 2022; García-Vázquez, Parra-Pérez, et al., 2020; García-Vázquez, Valdés-Cuervo, et al., 2020; van Noorden et al., 2015).

Conclusion

The entire discussion served the purpose of inculcating the idea that bullying can exist unconsciously in every individual. This discussion also shows that employees cannot communicate their distress or discomfort to their colleagues who unconsciously bullied them, stating that changes like healthy social skills are required for an individual to make the workplace safe and secure. Assertiveness and emotional stability can make employees stand up for themselves and be accountable for their actions without getting carried

away by emotions. Assertiveness can also create awareness of the situation and others' feelings and guide individuals to stand up for their rights without violating or breaching others' rights. Approaches that help to identify Unconscious Bullying. In the future, there is scope to study the Impression of Assertiveness and Social Skill training on bullies and victims of bullying, the Influence of Positive Psychology (Mindfulness, Gratitude exercises, and Empathy exercises) for bullies, the Impact of Formal Feedback training {constructive feedback or SBI (Situation Behavior and impact)} for employees in leadership managerial roles.

Appendix

The following questions are used to generate Group Discussion

Socio-Demographic Information of Employee

Age

Gender

Educational Qualification

Workplace Setting (Service sector or non-service Sector)

Experience

Questions for FGD

What is bullying according to you?

Is there a difference between Bullying and Harassment?

If yes, what is the Difference?

Are you aware that Bullying is also an offense or inappropriate behavior, like Harassment?

What makes a person or employee a superior get engaged in bullying even after having an awareness of bullying being offensive?

Do you think certain behavior can be unconscious?

In that sense does bullying can be unconscious?

Can you share any instances where you witnessed unconscious bullying at your workplace?

How far does a bully have awareness of his or her actions are offensive?

How can this be changed?

Author's Note

This study explores the existence of unconscious bullying in the workplace through a qualitative approach. We conducted two virtual focus groups with a total of 31 employees from various departments from various companies. The participants included a mix of junior, mid-level, and senior staff. The focus group discussions aimed to generate rich and in-depth discussions about employee experiences with potentially bullying behaviors and how anyone can be a bully unconsciously. The insights and perspectives gathered from these discussions formed the basis for this paper. We would like to express our sincere gratitude to all the participants who generously shared their time and experiences and to Dr. Vasudha T for help in arranging the discussion.

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