Research note

Workplace bullying in risk and safety professionals☆

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Previous research demonstrates that workplace bullying impacts the welfare of victimized employees, with further consequences for the organization and profession. There is, however, a paucity of information relating to the bullying directed at risk and safety professionals. The present study was conducted to address this issue. Method: Risk and safety professionals ($N = 420$) completed the Negative Acts Questionnaire – Revised and Brief Cope, and reported the extent to which they had been pressured to make or amend a risk or safety based decision. Results: Those experiencing workplace bullying were more likely to engage in a range of coping behaviors, with exposure to work-related and personal bullying particularly influential. Workplace bullying also predicted pressure to make or change a risk or safety based decision. Work related and physically intimidating bullying were particularly important for this aspect of professional practice. Conclusions: Findings are discussed with regard to current practice and the support available to risk and safety professionals. Practical applications: Risk and safety professionals require additional support in relation to workplace bullying and specifically guidance to resist pressure to make or change a risk or safety based decision.

1. Introduction

Workplace bullying, often termed aggression, mobbing, emotional abuse, undermining, or incivility, refers to a wide range of negative behaviors targeted at an employee. These behaviors may include criticism, allocating unfair workloads, social exclusion (formally or informally), asking a person to complete low status work, facial expressions (e.g., rolling eyes, glaring), personal insults, denying opportunities for professional development, and undermining authority (Kivimaki, Elovainio, & Vahtera, 2000). Relatively subtle behaviors are commonly performed at the early stages of the bullying process, which then escalate (particularly if unchallenged) and later involve behaviors that are less open to interpretation.

A range of organizational factors may contribute to the incidence of workplace bullying, such as a lack of resources, job insecurity, and restructuring (e.g., De Cuyper, Baillien, & De Witte, 2009; Skogstad, Matthiesen, & Einarsen, 2007). Furthermore, employees based in large organizations, masculine professions, or harsh environments (e.g., extreme temperatures) are most likely to experience workplace bullying (e.g., Baillien, Neyens, & De Witte, 2008). Victims are most commonly

bullied by supervisors and the leadership style adopted by the supervisor may be particularly important. For example, findings suggest that those adopting autocratic, authoritarian, passive, and laissez-faire styles are more likely to perpetrate or accept workplace bullying (e.g., Skogstad, Einarsen, Torsheim, Aasland, & Hetland, 2007).

Previous research has documented the extent to which workplace bullying impacts on a range of physical and psychological health conditions (e.g., Kreiner, Sulyok, & Rothenhausler, 2008; Reknes et al., 2014). Hence, those exposed to workplace bullying are more likely to be absent from work. The relationship between workplace bullying and employee wellbeing may be further exacerbated by the reduced confidence (Randle, 2003), self-esteem (Longo & Sherman, 2007), and use of legal or illegal substances (Normandale & Davies, 2002) which frequently occur in response to workplace bullying. The manner in which an employee responds to workplace bullying varies though relatively few studies have investigated this area of workplace bullying. The coping behaviors adopted are expected to influence the extent to which victims are distressed by their experience and obtain the necessary support.

Substantial variation occurs with regard to workplace bullying across organizations and sectors. Hence, it is not possible to extrapolate findings from one sector to another. At present, there is a paucity of information addressing the workplace bullying experienced by risk and safety professionals. These employees may be particularly vulnerable if the organization or employees engage in unsafe practice. Indeed, researchers have documented the relationship between 'whistleblowing' and workplace bullying or retaliatory behavior (Bjorkelo, 2013). This

retaliation may be informal and unofficial (De Maria & Jan, 1997) or formal and official (Cortina & Magley, 2003) and includes a range of behaviors such as ostracism or poor appraisal.

The present study investigates experiences of workplace bullying in risk and safety professionals, in particular the extent to which workplace bullying influences coping behavior and pressure to make or change risk and safety decisions.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Participants

Risk and safety professionals were recruited via email from the International Institute of Risk and Safety Management (IIRSM) membership list. Of those emailed ($N = 7133$), 2700 members opened the email, and 420 completed the survey (Men: $n = 381$, Women: $n = 39$). Hence the final sample represents 5.89% of those emailed and 15.56% of those accessing the survey. Participants were most commonly aged 51–60 years (39.3%), 35–50 years (33.1%), or 61 years and over (20.7%). Relatively few participants were aged 29–35 years (5.5%), or 22–28 years (1.4%). Participants were most frequently employed in large organizations with over 500 employees (52.4%), followed by those with fewer than 25 employees (18.6%), 151–500 employees (17.1%), 76–150 employees (6.3%), and 25–75 employees (5.6%).

2.2. Materials and procedure

Participants provided a range of demographic and occupational information (e.g., age, gender) and completed the *Negative Acts Questionnaire – Revised* (Einarsen, Hoel, & Notelaers, 2009) and Brief Cope (Carver, 1997). Participants were also asked to report the extent to which they had been pressured to make or change a risk or safety based decision on a five-point scale from $1 = never$ to $5 = daily$.

The *Negative Acts Questionnaire – Revised* (Einarsen et al., 2009) is a 22-item measure of exposure to bullying in the workplace. The questionnaire contains three sub-scales: Work-Related Bullying; Personal Bullying; and Physically Intimidating Forms of Bullying. Participants reported the extent to which they had been subject to a range of behaviors in their place of work during the previous six months on a five-point scale from $1 = never$ to $5 = daily$. Example items include "*Being humiliated or ridiculed in connection with your work*" (Personal Bullying) and "*Threats of violence or physical abuse or actual abuse*" (Physically Intimidating). Higher scores indicate more frequent workplace bullying. Cronbach's alphas were acceptable in the present study: Work-Related Bullying ($\alpha = .861$); Personal Bullying ($\alpha = .923$); Physically Intimidating Forms of Bullying ($\alpha = .774$).

The Brief Cope (Carver, 1997) is a 28-item measure of coping behavior. Two items measure each form of coping behavior: Self-Distraction; Active Coping; Denial; Substance Use; Use of Emotional Support; Use of Instrumental Support; Behavioral Disengagement; Venting; Positive Reframing; Planning; Humor; Acceptance; Religion; and Self-Blame. Participants respond to each item on a four-point scale from $1 = I$ *haven't been doing this at all* to $4 = I've been doing this a lot$. Example items include "*I've been getting help and advice from other people*" (Use of Instrumental Support) and "*I've been using alcohol or other drugs to help me get through it*" (Substance Use). Higher scores indicate greater use of the coping behavior and Cronbach's alphas were acceptable in the present study for all except the behavioral disengagement and positive reframing subscales: Self-Distraction ($\alpha = .601$); Active Coping ($\alpha = .837$); Denial ($\alpha = .822$); Substance Use ($\alpha = .944$); Use of Emotional Support ($\alpha = .791$); Use of Instrumental Support ($\alpha = .817$); Behavioral Disengagement ($\alpha = .429$); Venting ($\alpha = .708$); Positive Reframing ($\alpha = .361$); Planning ($\alpha = .902$); Humor ($\alpha = .824$); Acceptance ($\alpha = .759$); Religion ($\alpha = .924$); Self-Blame ($\alpha = .762$).

3. Results

Participants provided information relating to workplace bullying (work related, personal, and physically intimidating), coping behavior (self-distraction, active coping, denial, substance use, emotional support, instrumental support, behavioral disengagement, venting, positive reframing, planning, humor, acceptance, religion, and self-blame), and pressure to make or change a risk or safety based decision. Descriptive statistics and correlations between variables are displayed in Table 1.

A series of standard linear multiple regressions were conducted. The three workplace bullying subscales formed the predictor variables and coping behavior and pressure to make or change a decision were the outcome variables. Analyses revealed that workplace bullying predicts each form of coping investigated. Work related bullying was a significant individual predictor alone of substance use, humor, and self-blame whilst personal bullying was a significant individual predictor alone of denial, emotional support, instrumental support, and religion. Work related bullying and personal bullying were each significant individual predictors of self-distraction, active coping, behavioral disengagement, venting, positive reframing, and acceptance. Each workplace bullying behavior investigated (work related, personal, and physically intimidating) predicted the use of planning. In all cases, greater exposure to workplace bullying related to increased coping behavior.

Multiple regressions further indicated that workplace bullying (work related bullying, personal bullying, physically intimidating bullying) predicted being pressured to make or change a risk or safety based decision. Work related and physically intimidating bullying were significant individual predictors but personal bullying was not, such that those exposed to work related bullying and physically intimidating forms of bullying were more likely to be pressurized. These data are shown in Table 2.

4. Discussion

Risk and safety professionals reported their experiences of workplace bullying, coping behavior, and the degree to which they had been pressurized to make or change risk or safety based decisions. Risk and safety professionals experiencing workplace bullying were more likely to engage in a range of coping behaviors than those who were not victim to bullying. Exposure to work-related bullying (e.g., being given tasks with unreasonable deadlines, having opinions ignored, excessive monitoring of work) predicted increased use of self-distraction, active coping, substance use, behavioral disengagement, venting, positive reframing, planning, humor, acceptance, and self-blame. Personal bullying (e.g., being ignored or excluded, exposure to insulting or offensive remarks, being the subject of excessive teasing or sarcasm) predicted greater use of self-distraction, active coping, denial, emotional support, instrumental support, behavioral disengagement, venting, positive reframing, planning, acceptance, and religion.

Findings indicate there were relatively few differences between employee responses to work related and personal bullying. Substance abuse, humor, and self-blame (which occurred in response to work-related bullying only) and denial, emotional support, instrumental support, and religion (which were predicted by personal bullying only) were exceptions to this. Hence, interventions intended to address victim responses to workplace bullying may address work related and personal bullying together. Physically intimidating bullying (e.g., invasion of personal space, threats of violence, actual abuse) predicted increased planning behavior only, suggesting that professionals exposed to this form of bullying sought to actively address the bullying (e.g., through formal complaint or seeking alternative employment).

Behaviors such as active coping and engaging emotional or instrumental support may be beneficial to the victimized employee, though further research is required to assess the success or failure of these responses. Other coping behaviors could however be regarded as maladaptive. For example, substance use may impair judgment, lead to

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and correlations between workplace bullying, coping, and pressure to make or change a risk or safety based decision.

	WKB	PEB	PIB	SEL	ACT	DEN	SUB	EMO	INS	BEH	VEN	POS	PLA	HUM	ACC	REL	SBL	PRE
WKB																		
PEB	.705**																	
PIB	.496**	.653**																
SEL	.342**	.378**	.256**															
ACT	.428**	.479**	.260**	.641**														
DEN	.390**	.497**	.271**	.485**	.473**													
SUB	.297**	.236**	.138*	.249**	.203**	.378**												
EMO	.246**	.417**	.188**	.598**	.633**	.363**	.217**											
INS	.236**	.395**	.206**	.567**	.674**	.402**	.206**	.806**										
BEH	.384**	.443**	.235**	.592**	.651**	.570**	.309**	.610**	.645**									
VEN	.465**	.505**	.338**	.629**	.643**	.571**	.336**	.598**	.624**	.620**								
POS	.408**	.432**	.234**	.707**	.686**	.570**	.397**	.599**	.646**	.723**	698**							
PLA	.444**	.443**	.223**	.639**	.827**	.509**	.287**	.628**	.708**	.713**	.632**	.749**						
HUM	.453**	.351**	.283**	.511**	.466**	.370**	.274**	.357**	.385**	.478**	.459**	.565**	.487**					
ACC	.395**	.358**	.217**	.587**	.617**	.440**	.268**	.562**	.564**	.670**	.571**	.682**	.684**	.548**				
REL	.090	.252**	.091	.439**	.410**	.281**	.163**	.530**	.561**	.467**	.431**	.452**	.448**	.160**	.391**			
SBL	.310**	.181*	.129*	.449**	.447**	.437**	.394**	.410**	.446**	.470**	.549**	.623**	.537**	.473**	.526**	.309**		
PRE	.605**	.506**	.409**	.332**	.360**	.422**	.300**	.189**	.244**	.38**	.366**	.415**	.418**	.363**	.331**	.140**	.293**	
M	14.879	18.100	3.821	3.356	4.214	2.825	2.554	3.303	3.412	3.323	3.216	3.191	4.185	3.173	3.856	2.956	3.136	1.711
SD	5.900	7.640	1.681	1.560	2.032	1.540	1.363	1.654	1.767	1.466	1.545	1.358	2.125	1.510	1.867	1.892	1.520	.925

WKB = Work Related Bullying, PEB = Personal Bullying, PIB = Physically Intimidating Bullying, SEL = Self-Distraction, ACT = Active Coping, DEN = Denial, SUB = Substance Use, EMO = Emotional Support, INS = Instrumental Support, BEH = Behavioral Disengagement, VEN = Venting, POS = Positive Reframing, PLA = Planning, HUM = Humor, ACC = Acceptance, REL = Religion, SBL = Self-Blame, PRE = Pressure.

* = $p < .05$.
** = $p < .01$.

dependence or poor health, and may be associated with unsafe practice in the workplace. Furthermore, self-blame, self-distraction, and denial may discourage victimized employees from seeking support (e.g., making an official complaint). Additional research is required to examine the consequences of coping behaviors, including the manner in which perpetrators respond to these. Those experiencing workplace bullying (work related and physically intimidating bullying in particular) were pressured to make or change a risk or safety based decision, suggesting that the impact of workplace bullying may extend beyond the initial victim. Specifically, this influence may create unsafe working environments, place employees at risk, and leave employers vulnerable to infringements of safety legislation.

4.1. Limitations and future research

The present study was reliant on self-report questionnaire data, which, though consistent with previous research in this area, may be subject to random responding, social desirability, bias interpretation, and recall accuracy. Social desirability may be particularly important for the reporting of negative behaviors such as workplace bullying, though research indicates a greater willingness to disclose undesirable behaviors in online compared to offline studies (Booth-Kewley, Larson, & Miyoshi, 2007). Furthermore, the study recruited a self-selected sample and achieved a low participant response rate, even when compared to other organizational (Baruch & Holtom, 2008) and workplace bullying (Quine, 2002) research. Hence, findings cannot be generalized to the wider risk and safety professional population. As data were collected at one time point only, cause and effect cannot be established. In addition, workplace bullying and the manner in which an employee copes with workplace bullying displays substantial variation. In particular, gender and culture influence the perception, experience, and consequences of workplace bullying (e.g. Escartin, Zapf, Arrieta, & Rodriguez-Carballeira, 2011; Jóhannsdóttir & Ólafsson, 2004). Future research should therefore employ a longitudinal design and recruit a larger, more diverse sample, to investigate the causes and consequences of workplace bullying experienced by risk and safety professionals.

Previous research has demonstrated the manner in which those witnessing workplace bullying are adversely affected (Brewer & Whiteside, 2012). Witnesses display poorer physical and psychological health than those who do not witness workplace bullying and also display low productivity, job satisfaction, and commitment to the organization (Hoel & Cooper, 2000). This form of exposure may be particularly distressing for risk and safety professionals with responsibility for employee welfare and factors such as organizational safety culture which may contribute to the incidence of bullying type behavior. Future studies should consider risk and safety professional exposure to the victimization of others.

5. Practical applications

The impact of workplace bullying directed at risk and safety professionals may be particularly far reaching. For example, workplace bullying influences employee performance (Vogelpohl, Rice, Edwards, & Bork, 2013), engagement (Loh, Restubog, & Zagenczyk, 2010), and accidents and errors (Farrell, 1997). Together, these findings suggest that the welfare of employees under the care of victimized risk and safety professionals may be compromised. Relationships between workplace bullying and change of employer, receipt of disability benefit, and unemployment (Glambek, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2015) also highlight the potential impact of workplace bullying on the health and safety provision of the organization. Furthermore, the difficulty re-entering employment after victimization (Leymann, 1996), intentions to leave the sector (Djurkovic, McCormack, & Casimir, 2008), and perceived damage to professional reputation (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008) which characterize workplace bullying suggest that expertise within the risk and safety profession may be affected.

6. Conclusions

The present study indicates that risk and safety professionals experiencing workplace bullying are more likely to engage in each form of coping investigated. Exposure to work related and personal bullying were particularly important. Furthermore, risk and safety professionals exposed to workplace bullying were more likely to be pressurized to make or change a risk or safety based decision, which may have far reaching consequences with regards to the health and safety of other employees. Findings suggest that workplace bullying represents an important threat to the health, wellbeing, and practice of risk and safety management professionals. Future research should consider

Table 2
Multiple Regression Results for Workplace Bullying, Coping, and Pressure to Make or Change a Risk or Safety Based Decision.

Outcome	ANOVA R Adj R²	Individual bullying predictor	B t p
Self-distraction	F (3, 325) = 19.751, p < .001 R² = .154, Adj R² = .146	Work Related	β = .157, t = 2.182, p = .030
		Personal	β = .255, t = 3.156, p = .002
		Physically Intimidating	β = .017, t = .260, p = .795
Active coping	F (3, 325) = 36.304, p < .001 R² = .251, Adj R² = .244	Work Related	β = .193, t = 2.859, p = .005
		Personal	β = .413, t = 5.435, p < .001
		Physically Intimidating	β = −.109, t = −1.729, p = .085
Denial	F (3, 325) = 37.223, p < .001 R² = .256, Adj R² = .249	Work Related	β = .095, t = 1.421, p = .156
		Personal	β = .497, t = 6.583, p < .001
		Physically Intimidating	β = −.102, t = −1.608, p = .109
Substance use	F (3, 326) = 11.066, p < .001 R² = .092, Adj R² = .084	Work Related	β = .270, t = 3.634, p < .001
		Personal	β = .077, t = .925, p = .356
		Physically Intimidating	β = −.048, t = −.687, p = .492
Emotional support	F (3, 325) = 24.697, p < .001 R² = .186, Adj R² = .178	Work Related	β = −.043, t = −.615, p = .539
		Personal	β = .536, t = 6.753, p < .001
		Physically Intimidating	β = −.139, t = −2.116, p = .055
Instrumental support	F (3, 324) = 20.353, p < .001 R² = .159, Adj R² = .151	Work Related	β = −.049, t = −.674, p = .501
		Personal	β = .470, t = 5.820, p < .001
		Physically Intimidating	β = −.067, t = −.998, p = .319
Behavioral disengagement	F (3, 320) = 28.606, p < .001 R² = .211, Adj R² = .204	Work Related	β = .163, t = 2.332, p = .020
		Personal	β = .392, t = 4.987, p < .001
		Physically Intimidating	β = −.103, t = −1.576, p = .116
Venting	F (3, 324) = 41.021, p < .001 R² = .275, Adj R² = .269	Work Related	β = .206, t = 3.101, p = .002
		Personal	β = .363, t = 4.858, p < .001
		Physically Intimidating	β = −.006, t = −.097, p = .923
Positive reframing	F (3, 323) = 28.726, p < .001 R² = .211, Adj R² = .203	Work Related	β = .213, t = 3.050, p = .002
		Personal	β = .343, t = 4.384, p < .001
		Physically Intimidating	β = −.098, t = −1.508, p = .132
Planning	F (3, 317) = 33.431, p < .001 R² = .240, Adj R² = .233	Work Related	β = .282, t = 4.057, p < .001
		Personal	β = .330, t = 4.231, p < .001
		Physically Intimidating	β = .140, t = 2.169, p = .031
Humor	F (3, 318) = 30.652, p < .001 R² = .224, Adj R² = .217	Work Related	β = .434, t = 6.162, p < .001
		Personal	β = −.010, t = −.131, p = .896
		Physically Intimidating	β = .082, t = 1.268, p = .206
Acceptance	F (3, 322) = 22.169, p < .001 R² = .171, Adj R² = .163	Work Related	β = .296, t = 4.136, p < .001
		Personal	β = .185, t = 2.297, p = .022
		Physically Intimidating	β = −.056, t = −.841, p = .401
Religion	F (3, 324) = 10.452, p < .001 R² = .088, Adj R² = .080	Work Related	β = −.111, t = −1.488, p = .138
		Personal	β = .428, t = 5.110, p < .001
		Work Related	β = −.136, t = −1.956, p = .051
Self-blame	F (3, 321) = 10.098, p < .001 R² = .086, Adj R² = .078	Work Related	β = .330, t = 4.370, p < .001
		Personal	β = −.042, t = −.491, p = .624
		Physically Intimidating	β = −.020, t = −.279, p = .780
Pressure	F (3, 360) = 73.404, p < .001 R² = .380, Adj R² = .374	Work Related	β = .493, t = 8.478, p < .001
		Personal	β = .077, t = 1.154, p = .249
		Physically Intimidating	β = .111, t = 2.011, p = .045

the impact of witnessing workplace bullying on these professionals and the effectiveness of interventions intended to support risk and safety professionals victimized in the workplace.

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