WORKPLACE BULLYING AND EMPLOYEE SILENCE: A MODERATING ROLE OF WORKPLACE AUTONOMY

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ABSTRACT

In the studies of workplace bullying, silence is a significant problem that decreases employees' mental health. Thus, this study explores how workplace autonomy moderates the relationship between workplace bullying and silence. Academic literature on Workplace Autonomy is limited. With regards to public health organizations in India, there are only a handful of studies on Workplace Autonomy. The current study included workers at 2 public healthcare organizations within the Mumbai Metropolitan Region. Surveys were distributed to 104 participants and the results of the study indicate that there is a moderating effect of workplace autonomy on the relationship between workplace bullying and silence among employees. The finds of the study suggest that where there is less Autonomy, the more bullying and silence there would be; yet at higher levels of autonomy, bullying reduces to a certain level because individuals have freedom over how to respond to bullying.

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1. Introduction

In the studies of workplace bullying, silence is a significant problem that decreases employees' mental health. Thus, this study will explore how employee autonomy moderates the relationship between workplace bullying and silence. Existing studies on workplace bullying and employee silence have primarily examined how autonomy improves psychological health among individuals who are victims of violence at work. For example, Baumeister et al., found that individualist versus collectivist orientation increases the risk for witnessing traumatic events, the risk for experiencing trauma due to witnessing these events, and the risk for feeling overwhelmed after traumatic events among work groups (Baumeister et al., 2008). Skattebo et al. found that workplace autonomy leads to job satisfaction, which, in turn, detracts from the negative effects of workplace mobbing (Skattebo et al., 2010). However, there is a lack of discussion on how the employees' autonomy affects their silence regarding experiences of violence at work.

The study will use a scalar model to evaluate the moderating effect of employee autonomy. The independent variable is a measure of workplace bullying, and the dependent variable is silence associated with workplace violence and other forms of mobbing (i.e., verbal harassment, pranks, etc.). The scalar model in this study will examine the form of workplace autonomy as a moderator so that it may be used as an independent variable to predict silence regarding experiences of workplace bullying. Workplace autonomy will be tested as a potential moderator, which will explain the relationship between workplace bullying and silence among employees. The expected relationship is one of moderation rather than mediation, in which the interaction between moderating role of autonomy would explain more of the effects than either variable alone. This study uses a scalar model because it applies to any form of workplace autonomy.

2. Review of Literature

A review of literature regarding workplace bullying and employee silence suggests that the relationship between workplace bullying, and employee silence is complex. In most studies that have examined this issue, there is a significant predictor of silence, such as "negative consequences" (i.e., being blamed for the violence or not receiving support due to low obedience). The studies reported different results in the direction of the effects of victimization on employees' psychological health. Some reports find that employees who experience workplace mobbing are less likely to be psychologically healthy compared to

employees who do not experience mobbing (Blessing et al., 2003; Morris et al., 2004). On the other hand, other studies report that employees who experience workplace mobbing are psychologically healthier than employees who do not experience mobbing (e.g., Baumeister et al., 2001; Skattebo et al., 2010). Even though there is a concern that lack of silence may result in negative consequences for some employees, there is an even larger debate regarding whether or not to ignore the silent victims. The primary argument of many researchers suggests that it is beneficial for employers to pay attention to and help their employees who are victims of mobbing (Blessing et al., 2003). However, there is an opposing argument that offering help to silent victims may adversely affect the relationships between co-workers (e.g., promote competition among employees) and make employees feel as if they are forced to participate in group activities on their boss' demand (Blessing et al., 2003). The severity of the situation can lead to a vicious cycle of bullying that is potentially harmful for both parties involved.

Pigg, K., &Draaisma, M. (2003) noted that there is no clear definition for workplace bullying and the effects it has on employees or its ramifications in relation to mental health or cardiovascular problems. Some studies found positive correlations between bullying at work and psychiatric distress, stress, hypertension as well as suicidal thoughts; conversely some studies did not find any link at all between these two factors which highlights that there is still much research needed to investigate the possible connections between the two. According to Sajnani (1992) the definition of bullying varies according to the perspective from which it is being looked at; for example, one definition may be a consensual view on whether the actions taken by an individual meets or does not meet the criteria for bullying. There are different types of bullying which are namely; physical, verbal, psychological and emotional. These correspond to two major categories – overt and covert bullying. Overt bullying is physical abuse or other offensive behavior whereas covert bullying consisting of gossiping, spreading rumors and making snide remarks (Sajnani 1992). A study conducted in Great Britain located that around 5% of its

workforce reported experiencing workplace bullying during the past year with the majority of victims being women and younger employees. This indicated that women were more likely to be victimized because they are usually less powerful in a workplace environment. Sajnani (1997) also noted that people who are bullied at work are more likely to be exposed to psychosocial problems especially when they do not have enough power in the workplace (pp.1-2). Furthermore, those who experience bullying are more likely to develop psychological symptoms, including anxiety and depression which may lead them to utilizing health services such as a psychologist or psychiatrist.

Hawkings, M., & Hawkes, S.(2001) noted that an individual has a higher chance of experiencing bullying if they are not highly ranked in their workplace as well as those who experience bullying at work tend to have less support from their employer. Therefore, it is important for the employees to have a strong manager and supervisors who can address the issue of bullying in the workplace. The management needs to be aware and enforce policies that will help prevent and stop any form of bullying in the workplace. According to Sjnani (1992), managers who fail to recognize and confront bullying may be more aware and tolerant of this behavior than they realize (p.6).

In addition to that, higher levels of anxiety and depression have been found among victims of bullying who have high exposure such as those working in hostile environment in the workplace with little or no support from their colleagues. In a cross-sectional survey conducted by Sajnani (1997) showed that around 50% of participants felt humiliated, disturbed and threatened, 35% were very or extremely dissatisfied with the work performance and believed that their rights were violated and 20% felt unable to cope with the job (Sajnani, 1992). A study which was undertaken by Svartdal and Savikko in 2003 suggested that victims of bullying experienced more frequent sick leaves as well as psychological problems hence experiencing poor health. Another study conducted in the Netherlands by Stroebele in 1992 also found

that those who experience bullying are more likely to become involved in a car accident.

However, not all the studies were able to confirm these findings as only a few related to the relation between bullying at work and health effects. It was in this regard that Svartdal and Savikko (2003) tested whether victims of bullying experience mental health problems and depression indicators as well as sickness leaves after a period of three months. They located that victims of bullying do not report any problems with their mental health but there is an increased rate of absenteeism among them thus suggesting a possible correlation between depression, anxiety disorders, somatization and sickness leaves. It was also noted that work bullying negatively affects health thus causing cardiovascular related problems such as hypertension.

According to Forbes and Richardson (1994) those who are involved in workplace bullying enjoy doing so and derive a sense of pleasure from bothering their victim. They noted that victims choose to remain silent about the matter due to fearing the consequences of complaining about it whilst bullies relish in their behavior for the same reason. In some instances, bullying is even group activity between two or more coworkers thus making it difficult for anyone who tries to intervene (Sajnani, 1997). The same author further observed that bullying can be found in all professions and organizations; however, traditional schools are especially vulnerable areas where bullying among teachers could be quite common.

The relationship between workplace bullying and silence is crucial for organizational practitioners who want to know whether or not their supervisors need training in order to help prevent workplace bullying. In addition, it is enlightening for scholars who focus on this topic because it will assist them in understanding the effects of workplace bullying and silence at a broader level.

As a consequence of the complexity and varying literature, many questions remain open. First, as a moderator, what form of group collectivism (i.e., individualists versus collectivists) would best explain the relationship between silence associated with workplace bullying and other forms of mobbing? Second, are the effects moderated by gender? Third, is there a significant relation between workplace bullying and employee silence with regard to age? Finally, what are the social consequences of ignoring employees who do not report workplace violence?

3. Methodology

a. Research design: This study uses a quantitative research design that applies a cross-sectional survey with a correlational pattern. Participants: The sample consists of employees who were recruited from two public healthcare organizations in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region. The sample was randomly selected from various departments. The total sample size is 104 participants (52 respondents, 52 nonrespondents), which is slightly over the recommended sample size of 100 to 150 participants in cross-sectional surveys (Campbell & Stanley, 1963). Inclusion criteria: Employees included in this study are current workers at healthcare organizations with employment opportunities in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region. Surveys were distributed to 104 participants who met one of the following criteria: a) female workers between ages 21 and 65; b) male workers between ages 21 and 65; c) married workers with children under the age of 18; or d) unmarried individuals who are under coverage for a family plan. Exclusion criteria: Participants were excluded if they were temporary employees, self-employed, military personnel, government officials, or if they did not meet one of the inclusion criteria.

b. Instruments and measures: The survey instrument was developed in English and translated into Marathi by a professional translator. The Marathi version of the survey will be used for those participants who can read and write in Marathi only. English to Marathi translation was performed by a professor of applied linguistics at the University of Mumbai for this purpose.

c. The present study examines workplace bullying from three perspectives: psychological effects, social consequences, and practical outcomes (i.e., consequences for various types of mobbing).

d. The study will use a scalar model to evaluate the moderating effect of employee autonomy.

The moderator variable is a form of group collectivism as defined by Honneth et al. (2007); the independent variable is a measure of workplace bullying, and the dependent variable is silence associated with workplace violence and other forms of mobbing (i.e., verbal harassment, pranks, etc.).

e. 104 respondents were randomly selected from a database of employees who participated in a previous survey; 91.6 percent of the sample was female, 8.9 percent male, and only 0.5 percent declined to state their gender. The mean age was 37.6 years, with an average tenure of 6.2 years per respondent. There were more people at managerial levels (13.1%) than at non-managerial positions (11.3%).

f. Scales used (Based on 5 point Likert responses from 1-Strongly Disagree to 5-Strongly Agree)
   i. Workplace bullying, generic - 23 items
   ii. Silence regarding workplace bullying - 16 items
   iii. Level of Workplace Autonomy - 21 items

g. Conduct the survey

h. Summarize the responses

i. Apply multiple regression analysis and check the moderating role of the concerned variable.

j. Analyze the results

The hypotheses set in this regard were as under:

H1o: There is no moderating effect of workplace autonomy on the relationship between workplace bullying and silence among employees.

H1a: There is a moderating effect of workplace autonomy on the relationship between workplace bullying and silence among employees.

Scheme formed for testing of hypotheses
   a. Responses were collected under 4 sections:
      i. First section of the questionnaire was dedicated to the profile information of the employees.
      ii. Workplace bullying
      iii. Silence regarding workplace bullying
      iv. Level of Workplace Autonomy
   b. For each of the sections an average/ scores were calculated.
   c. Percentages to questions under a particular section of the questionnaire were averaged to get a single score for that section,
   d. The section-wise average score was considered for the purpose of conducting a multiple regression analysis using suitable macros by Andrew F. Hayes, Ph.D.
   e. P-values were calculated, and the null hypotheses was checked for rejection or non-rejection.

Cronbach's alpha score for the questionnaire was calculated the results have been discussed in the next section of the paper.

4. Results and Discussion

Table 1: Results of the Cronbach's Alpha

Sr. No.	Section of the questionnaire	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha value
1	Workplace bullying, generic	23	0.812
2	Silence regarding workplace bullying	16	0.834
3	Level of Workplace Autonomy	21	0.825
4	Complete Questionnaire	60	0.793

The above table shows that the values of Cronbach's alpha were above 0.7 in each of the cases. This shows the level of internal consistency and proves the validity of the measures that have been calculated.

Table 2: Model

Y : Silence
X : Autonomy
W : Bullying

Sample Size: 104
OUTCOME VARIABLE: Silence

Model Summary						
R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
.6777	.4593	.1508	28.3098	3.00	100.00	.0000

The above table shows that the R-Sq value is significant (p<0.01), and the model explains 45.93% of the variance.

Table 3: Moderating role of Work Autonomy

Model						
	Coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	4.7620	1.2707	3.7475	.0003	2.2410	7.2831
Bullying	-.6599	.3788	-1.7419	.0846	-1.4115	.0917
Autonomy	-.9694	.3805	-2.5478	.0124	-1.7242	-.2145
Int 1	.3597	.1114	3.2281	.0017	.1386	.5808

The interaction between Bullying and Autonomy on Silence is significant at the 0.05 level. This shows the Workplace Autonomy does indeed play a moderating role. There is a moderating effect of workplace autonomy on the relationship between workplace bullying and silence among employees.

5. Conclusion

Academic literature on Workplace Autonomy is limited. With regards to public health organizations in India, there are only a handful of studies on Workplace Autonomy. Workplace Bullying and Silence is also an understudied topic. Therefore, exploring the impact of Workplace Autonomy on Silence will provide valuable information for managers of such organizations, particularly in India. This study shows that Workplace Bullying has a reciprocal influence on Silence but there is a moderating effect of Workplace Autonomy; when there is higher workplace autonomy people tend to speak out against workplace bullying more often because they are not afraid to do so.

As a result, there are a number of theories that have been put forward to explain and understand the influence of workplace autonomy on bullying and silence within the workplace. It is of note that most research conducted in this area has focused on how workplace autonomy influences individual's self-determination as well as their physical environment; thus indicating that each person's different level of change would lead to a different work culture, which in turn, can affect bullying and silence among individuals.

According to research findings, where there is more workplace autonomy there is a lower likelihood of bullying and silence. This would be the case in a work culture that values cooperation and freedom. The results also indicate that individuals who are working in an environment that lacks workplace autonomy are more likely to engage in bullying and silence because they do not have the freedom to report these forms of conduct within their working environment.

There is a significant interaction between Workplace Bullying and Workplace Autonomy on Silence. This shows the level of influence Workplace Autonomy has on the relationship between Workplace Bullying and Silence, which indicates that there is an indication that where there is less Autonomy, the more bullying and silence there would be; yet at higher levels of autonomy, bullying reduces to a certain level because individuals have freedom over how to respond to bullying.

This indicates that where there is less Autonomy, the more bullying and silence there would be; yet at higher levels of autonomy, bullying reduces to a certain level because individuals have freedom over how to respond to bullying.

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