

The nature, causes and consequences of bullying at work: The Norwegian experience

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Introduction

Recent studies suggest that exposure to bullying in the workplace is a serious problem for many workers around Europe (see also Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf & Cooper, 2003). As many as 5-10% of European employees may suffer from exposure to bullying and harassment at work at any one time. It prevails in both private and public organizations, and finds its victims among men and women as well as among managers and workers alike. Studies also show that exposure to bullying in the workplace is a severe source of stress at work and may be a crippling and devastating problem for those exposed. Although single acts of aggression and harassment occur fairly often in everyday interaction at work, they seem to be associated with severe health problems in the target when occurring on a regular basis (Einarsen & Raknes, 1997; Einarsen, 2000).

The aim of this paper is to present research on workplace bullying conducted during the last decade by the bullying research team at the University of Bergen (see also Einarsen, 1999; 2000; Einarsen, Zapf, Hoel & Cooper, 2003). Since the late 1980s, our research has focused on the issues of "who is doing what to whom, where why and with what kinds of consequences" in relation to bullying at work. The group published its first peer-reviewed article in 1989 (Matthiesen, Raknes & Rokkum, 1989). The empirical research has been based on large scale surveys with more than 10,000 Norwegian workers (e.g., Einarsen et al., 1994; Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996), case studies of targets (Matthiesen et al., 2003) and organizations (Einarsen & Raknes, 1997), as well as interview studies (e.g., Einarsen et al., 1994).

What is bullying at work?

Bullying is defined as a situation in which, over a period of time, one or more persons are persistently on the receiving end of negative actions from one or several others in a situation where the one at the receiving end has difficulties defending against these actions (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996). Hence, the concept of bullying at work refers to all situations where one or more persons feel subjected to negative behavior from others in the workplace over a period of time and in a situation where they for different reasons are unable to defend themselves against these actions. The first core of the definition therefore relates to exposure to repeated and enduring negative acts in the workplace (Einarsen, 2000). The second core dimension is about an imbalance in formal or informal power between the involved parties. Typically, a victim is constantly teased, badgered and insulted and perceives that he or she has little recourse to retaliate in kind (Brodsky, 1976). We may distinguish between work-related bullying (such as being exposed to unreasonable deadlines, unmanageable workloads or other types of behaviors that make the work situation difficult for the victim) and bullying that is primarily person-related (such as insulting remarks, excessive teasing, gossip and rumors, social isolation and exclusion). These types of behaviors may be common and experienced by most people at work from time to time. As a single episode in a positive social climate, such actions may even be harmless. However, when behaviors that are perceived as unwanted by the recipient are systematically and continually aimed at a particular person, and especially in a situation where the victim feels defenseless against the actions or the persons performing them, they become acts of bullying. Among 137 Norwegian victims of bullying at work, social isolation and exclusion, devaluation of one's work and efforts, and exposure to teasing, insulting remarks and ridicule, were the most common negative acts, as reported by a group of some 200 victims (Einarsen et al., 1994).

Although there may be many unpleasant experiences requiring our attention and a need for a label that may initiate such attention, we must avoid bullying becoming a popular but misused concept. In Norway, bullying (or mobbing, which is our term) has evolved into a very popular term, and therefore has almost lost its meaning. In everyday language, it has even been used to describe good-hearted joking and horseplay, resulting in a situation where bullying was seen as something rather minor, to be easily accepted and tolerated. If someone resented bullying and reported being seriously hurt, he was seen as a neurotic and