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PEER ABUSIVE BEHAVIOR: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Abstract

Research background: Counterproductive work behavior (CWB) refers to repeated wilful and deliberate behavior that damages the organization or its members and goes against the grain of social acceptability. Most of the literature focuses on manager bullying, with only a few hints of coworker intimidation.

Purpose of the article: This study examined the implications and consequences of coworker abuse on CWB, job satisfaction, and well-being. We hypothesized that coworker abusive behavior will associate positively with CWB; negatively with job satisfaction; negatively with physical well-being, and; negatively with psychological well-being.

Methods: 206 workers from both the public and private sectors answered questionnaires regarding abuse at work, CWB, job satisfaction, psychological well-being, and physical well-being. Coworker abusive behavior was taken from Tepper's (2020) classic questionnaire. The measure 'counterproductive work behavior' examines the frequency of inappropriate behaviors, initially used by Bennet and Robinson (2000). Job satisfaction was measured with the Michigan Organizational Assessment Questionnaire. The questions relate to work conditions, coworkers, and general satisfaction (Hammond and Bowling, 2008). Physical well-being was measured with Schat, Kelloway, and Desmarais (2005) Physical Health Questionnaire (PHQ). Physical well-being was measured with the Mental Health Continuum Short Form (MHC – SF) (Lamers et al., 2011).

Findings and value-added: A positive relationship was found between coworkers' abusive behavior and CWB, and negative relationships were found between workers' job satisfaction and both types of well-being, and CWB. We concluded that peer abusive behavior is detrimental to work-related attitudes and the health of employees exposed to this behavior. Thus, we suggest that organizations undertake preventive steps to eradicate coworkers' workplace abuse.

Keywords: Abusive behavior; counterproductive behavior; job satisfaction; wellbeing

JEL Classification: D91; K42; O15

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Introduction

Workplace dynamics significantly influence organizational success and employee well-being. Among the various challenges faced by employees, coworker abuse stands out as a pervasive issue with far-reaching implications. While the majority of research on counterproductive work behaviors (CWB) has centered on managerial misconduct, relatively little attention has been given to abusive behaviors among peers. This study seeks to bridge this gap by exploring how coworker abuse impacts critical outcomes, such as job satisfaction, physical and psychological well-being, and counterproductive work behaviors.

Grounded in established theories, this research highlights the destructive ripple effects of peer abuse in workplace settings. By examining the interplay between abusive peer behaviors and employee outcomes, the study underscores the urgent need for organizations to recognize and address such misconduct. Through this exploration, we aim to contribute to a growing body of literature advocating for healthier workplace environments prioritizing employee dignity and collaboration.

1. Abusive Behavior at Work

Existing theoretical frameworks that define abuse concentrate on one of two approaches: violation of one's dignity, or damage to one's mental and physical health and safety. However, they do not sufficiently capture the injustice entailed in abuse or provide guidelines for policymakers and regulators against abuse. Escartín (2016) emphasized the effectiveness of interventions to prevent workplace abuse, which have only recently expanded to facilitate the synthesis of empirical research findings.

In general, it can be said that workplace abusive behavior is unacceptable conduct that damages people's dignity, and mental and physical wellbeing. Protection of human dignity and freedom is a key constitutional value of our legal system, and the law is therefore committed to averting such damage. Abusive workplace behavior is not limited to individual cases, and sizable parts of the workforce are exposed to it at various times and in various situations. Consequently, dealing with abuse cannot remain at the organizational level, which would choose to keep these issues within the organization. People subjected to abusive behavior at work could suffer from severe damage to their quality of life, which often spills over to their family and friends. This is an additional incentive to setting suitable behavior norms in the workplace (Guerrero, 2004).

Recent studies (e.g., Liao et al., 2021) have shown that abusive workplace behavior is a prevalent problem in the US and Canada, Europe, the UK, South Africa, and Israel. This is not a trivial problem that can be ignored or made light of. Research has documented not just the psychological damage of abuse, but also its economic consequences – to the direct targets of the abuse, to the workplace, to organizational efficiency, and to the entire economy. Although there is no unanimously accepted definition of workplace abuse (Schneebaum, 2021), most countries define it as repeated abuse by one or more colleagues. Workplace abuse manifests in psychological (not physical) abuse, intimidation, humiliation, or attempts to sabotage one's work. This includes slandering them to other coworkers or superiors, ostracizing them, or shaming them in work WhatsApp groups. Typical abuse situations include shouting and verbal harassment, excessive monitoring, overly harsh or baseless criticism, threats, and bullying. Although work interactions

changed during the COVID pandemic, when people worked from home, abuse is still very much alive in electronic networks, and has even intensified. It has been found that abusive expressions have radicalized WhatsApp groups (Amichai-Hamburger, 2021). As most communications are on-screen, people give themselves much more leniency than if the conversation were face-to-face. However, WhatsApp violations are documented and provable. Such incidences should be included in the definitions of abuse, but considering its ambiguous meaning, we would like to suggest a wider definition.

Workplace abuse comprises direct and/or indirect negative behaviors that include aggression, hostility, intimidation, and harm. These typically persistent undesirable actions are performed by an individual and/or group towards another individual and/or group at work, privately and/or publicly, in real and/or virtual ways (D'Cruz, 2015; D'Cruz, Noronha and Lutgen-Sandvik, 2018). Fox and Spector (2005) described workplace abuse as emotional abuse or harassment in the workplace. It has been ascribed painful metaphors of nightmares, demons, and heartbreak (Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik and Alberts, 2006), which emphasize its unbelievable, depressing, humiliating, and enervating nature (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2005). Consequently, it is not surprising that workplace abuse is described as unethical behavior that goes against the grain of any social and universal acceptability (Ramsay, Troth, and Branch, 2011).

D'Cruz and Noronha (2016, p.409) described the known types of emotional workplace bullying. Abuse can be interpersonal and/or de-personalized (pp.412-413), and its location can be internal and/or external to the workplace (p.414). They emphasized that any of these types of workplace bullying could be somewhere else, or face-to-face, or cyber, or online/electronic, and described it as traditional and/or virtual bullying, respectively (D'Cruz, 2015, p.8). These versions make workplace abuse a complex concept, and describe the international dilemmas involved in its definition.

The research to demarcate workplace abuse is in its early stages and has yet to achieve the existing conceptual analysis of sexual abuse. The theoretical foundation for examining workplace abuse as legal wrongdoing is typically not addressed directly in the literature (Schneebaum, 2021). Existing research (D'Cruz, Noronha and Beale, 2014) assumed, in general, that workplace abuse was unacceptable, and focused its efforts on locating abuse, often creating legal mechanisms to correct the problem, and providing victims with the defensive measures they deserved.

We argue that, when the abuser is a superior or manager, workplace abuse creates a sense of employment insecurity. However, when the abuser is a coworker, it might also cause employment vulnerability.

The research literature is in the relatively early stages of investigating the workplace bullying phenomenon, but it is obvious that bullying occurs quite frequently. It can manifest in varied ways that breach the workplace equilibrium and norms, and damage its productivity. Since the majority of workplace interactions are between the workers themselves, and seeing that most of the bullying literature focuses on man-ager bullying with only a few hints of coworker bullying, this study examines the consequences and implications of coworker bullying.

Workplace bullying is a process rather than a static phenomenon (Boudrias, Trépanier and Salin, 2021), and is defined as a repetitive cycle of negative acts that frustrate victims because of their inability to cope with these actions. Victims of bullying feel humiliated and

distressed, which could interfere with their performance or create a toxic work environment. The victim feels deceived, injured, and denied basic rights at work and, in some cases, unable to confront the abuser because they remain within 'permissible' limits (Salin et al., 2018).

Workplace bullying can cause increased ineffectiveness, persecution, social isolation, and ostracism. Research has found a relationship between bullying and increased risk of absenteeism or sick leave and resignation (Nielsen and Einarsen, 2018). Furthermore, workers who experience harassment and abuse in the workplace exhibit increased dissatisfaction, increased ineffectiveness, persecution, social isolation, and ostracism. Abuse victims took seven days more sick leave days than others who had not experienced abuse (Hoel, Cooper and Einarsen, 2020).

Conservation of Resources (COR) theory explains why workplace bullying can lead to dissatisfaction with work. COR posits that when work resources are abundant (such as support from superiors or role enrichment), workers invest more in their jobs, and vice versa. When resources are in short supply (such as an especially demanding job or lack of support from superiors and coworkers), workers invest less in their work to conserve the existing resources. The existing or expected shortage of resources leads workers to lessen their proactivity at work to prevent an additional decline in resources (Wang, Hsieh and Wang, 2020).

2. Counterproductive Work Behavior (CWB)

Counterproductive work behavior (CWB) relates to repeated wilful and deliberate behaviors that cause damage to the organization or its members (Itzkovitz, Dolev and Heilbrunn, 2018). These are behaviors that violate shared organizational expectations and norms, social values, and accepted standards of behavior, manifested by tardiness, absenteeism, resignation, waste of resources, neglect, attending to private affairs during work hours, spreading rumors, refusal to cooperate, and sabotage. CWB affects decision-making processes, productivity, profitability, and costs (Shapira-Lishchinsky and Levy-Gazenfrantz, 2020).

Research on organizational behavior tends to focus on positive and socially acceptable behaviors in the workplace. Although CWB is an integral part of an organization's life, and its results are significant for both the individual and the organization, research on these behaviors is less common, and knowledge about them is limited (Elisha and Vardi, 2021).

There are two distinct approaches concerning the causes of CWB. First, the individual approach that claims that the reasons for inappropriate behavior come from the individual. The second approach is the systems approach which posits that the organization is a complex social arena in which social norms and the organizational culture affect the workers' behavior (Shapira-Lishchinsky and Levy-Gazenfrantz, 2020). Vardi and Weitz (2020) presented a motivational model of CWB in organizations, and suggested dividing these behaviors into three main types according to the abuser's intention: type S – for the abuser's personal benefit; type O – for the organization's benefit; and type D – with intent to do harm. They also classified precursors of CWB by organization, group, role/career, and individual; for example, work autonomy, which can provide many opportunities of desired

and normative behaviors, could also contribute to CWB. The following hypothesis was formulated:

H1: Coworker abusive behavior will associate positively with CWB.

3. Job Satisfaction

Over the years, many definitions of the concept 'job satisfaction' have been suggested (Bowling and Hammond, 2008). Capitalizing on these, job satisfaction may be seen as a collection of individuals' feelings about particular aspects of their work including recognition, supervision, work conditions, organizational policy, and pay. These attitudes may be positive or negative, contingent on the discrepancy between work-related needs and attainable rewards. In short, job satisfaction is determined by the degree of correlation between a worker's needs and the job's need gratification potential in a specific work setting.

Job satisfaction is the individual's perception of work or work experiences including multidimensional psychological reactions with cognitive, emotional and behavioral elements. A number of theories relate to the reasons for job satisfaction, classified by situation theory (job satisfaction comes from the nature of the work, or other environmental aspects), interactive theories (job satisfaction is dictated by interactions of situations and personal elements), and dispositive approaches (job satisfaction is the outcome of the individual's personality setup (Judge, Zhang and Glerum, 2020).

Research has found that job satisfaction is correlated with higher performance, productivity, customers' satisfaction, and organizational civic behaviors (OCB). Therefore, job satisfaction can affect, organizational efficiency, performance, and service quality on the social level (Rostami et al., 2022; Saha et al., 2021). Whereas job satisfaction has a positive effect, job dissatisfaction could reduce motivation and commitment and, consequently, worse output (Saha et al., 2021).

H2: Coworker abusive behavior will associate negatively with job satisfaction.

4. Psychological and Physical Wellbeing

Studies have shown that exposure to workplace bullying has severe implications for workers' psychological and physical well-being. Bullying is mainly of a psychological nature. It is characterized by subtle and discreet actions, but still has traumatic effects (Salin et al., 2018). Nielsen and Einarsen (2018) showed that workplace abuse directly and clearly affects one's mental capacities and, as such, is related to symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety. The victims are hurt due to their inability to mentally cope with the harassment they suffer. An additional study described the effects of work-place bullying as a destructive phenomenon that damages many of the victim's emotional and mental aspects, causing psychological distress symptoms such as low self-confidence and self-esteem, guilt, shame, and self-deprecation (Hogh, Mikkelsen and Hansen, 2020).

Psychological implications often manifest in depression, burnout and resentment, which affect the abused workers' work and emotional experience in the workplace (Boudrias,

Trépanier and Salin, 2021). When the bullying is unending, it is considered an external stressor that could be damaging, which makes it even harder for the victim to cope. It emphasizes the victim's helplessness and inability to cope, which gives rise to extreme mental and emotional situations (Einarsen, et al., 2020).

In addition, when one is a target of workplace bullying, it could also affect physical health (Boudrias, Trépanier and Salin, 2021). Recorded physical implications include headaches, back pains, eating disorders, sleep disorders, and more. Cognitive effects were also reported including disorientation, confusion, lack of concentration, and more (Kramer, 2018). Abuse could also affect the development of chronic diseases that could threaten one's life (Hogh, Mikkelsen and Hansen, 2020). Mikkelsen and colleagues (2020) also found that people who had suffered from workplace bullying exhibited symptoms such as lack of concentration, problems sleeping, mood swings, anxiety and various signs of depression, only a few months after the abuse had started. Furthermore, in some cases, victims of abuse suffered from a deterioration of chronic illnesses such as asthma or hypertension. They also experienced a sense of persecution, character assassination, and that their reputation had been destroyed. They felt terrorized when the phone rang, or someone called their name. Some reported that coping at the workplace left them with internal scars that would take a long time to heal (Gupta, Gupta and Wadhwa, 2020).

Consequently, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H3a: Coworker abusive behavior will correlate negatively with physical well-being.

H3b: Coworker abusive behavior will correlate negatively with psychological wellbeing.

5. Research Method

Participants

206 workers from both the public (57%) and private (43%) sectors participated in this study. The age range of the participants was 20-65, about 58% were women, and 42% men. About 50% were in a managerial position, and 50% in a non-managerial position.

Measures

The questionnaire included general demographic information (age, gender, etc.) to make sure that the sample was more or less heterogenic. The type of organization was requested in an attempt to analyze a balanced number of employees from the public and private sectors, to avoid bias.

Coworker abusive behavior (i.e., the interviewee's exposure to abuse by coworkers) was taken from Tepper's (2020) classic questionnaire. The questionnaire includes 15 items on a Likert scale of 1 (Don't recall it ever happened to me) to 6 (Happens frequently). Sample item: "Please grade the frequency of a coworker being rude to you". Cronbach's alpha for this questionnaire was 0.98 (M=2.36, SD=1.32).

The measure 'counterproductive work behavior' examines the frequency of inappropriate behaviors. The questionnaire was initially used by Bennet and Robinson (2000), and consists of 15 items on a Likert scale of 1 (Never) to 6 (Very frequently). Sample item: "How often did you deliberately harm equipment or property in your current job?" This measure's reliability coefficient was $\alpha=0.96$ (M=2.14, SD=1.10).

Job satisfaction was measured with the Michigan Organizational Assessment Questionnaire – Job Satisfaction Subscale translated to He-brew by Shirom (1998). The questions relate to work conditions, coworkers, and general satisfaction (Hammond and Bowling, 2008). The questionnaire includes 11 items on a Likert scale of 1 (Very unsatisfied) to 6 (Very satisfied). Sample item: "Satisfaction with people who work with me". Cronbach's alpha was 0.95 (M=3.78, SD=1.12).

Physical well-being was measured with Schat, Kelloway and Desmarais's (2005) Physical Health Questionnaire (PHQ). The questionnaire consists of 14 items on a Likert scale of 1 (Not at all) to 6 (All the time). Sample item: "How often did you have headaches in the last month?". Reverse item: "How often was your sleep peaceful and uninterrupted?" The reliability coefficient was $\alpha=0.92$ (M=2.60, SD=0.93).

Physical well-being was measured with the Mental Health Continuum Short Form (MHC – SF) (Lamers et al., 2011) translated into He-brew (Shrira, Bodner and Palgi, 2016). The questionnaire consists of 14 items on a Likert scale of 1 (Not at all) to 6 (Every day). Sample item: "During the past month, how often did you feel satisfied with life?" Cronbach's alpha was 0.98 (M=3.69, SD=1.22).

6. Results

First, we calculated the correlations between the variables, which are displayed in Table no. 1.

Table no. 1. Pearson correlations between study variables

NO.	VARIABLE	1	2	3	4	5
1	Workplace abuse	1				
2	CWB	.90**	1			
3	Job satisfaction	-.69**	-.69**	1		
4	Physical wellbeing	-.70**	-.74**	-.57**	1	
5	Psychological wellbeing	-.63**	-.66**	-.78**	-.53**	1

Note: ** $p<0.05$

Inspecting the correlations, the following conclusions emerged. Pearson correlations were used to examine the first hypothesis that coworker abusive behavior would associate positively with CWB. The analysis indicated that the more a worker experienced abuse by coworkers, the more he or she tended to engage in counterproductive work behaviors ($r=.90$, $p<0.01$). Hence, hypothesis H1 was corroborated.

The second hypothesis that coworker abusive behavior would associate negatively with job satisfaction was examined with Pearson correlations. The result shows a significant negative relationship between the variables ($r=-.69$, $p<0.01$). Namely, the more a worker experiences abuse by coworkers, the more his or her job satisfaction decreases. Hypothesis H2 was substantiated.

Pearson correlations were used to examine hypothesis H3a that assumed that coworker abusive behavior would correlate negatively with physical well-being. The findings show a significant negative relation-ship between the variables ($r=-.70$, $p<.01$), i.e., the more workers experience coworker abuse, the more their physical wellbeing is damaged. Hypothesis H3a was corroborated.

The final hypothesis (H3b) that coworker abusive behavior would associate negatively with psychological wellbeing was examined with Pearson correlations. The result shows a significant negative relation-ship between the variables ($r=-.63$, $p<0.01$), meaning that the more workers experience coworker abuse, the more their psychological well-being is damaged. Hypothesis H3b was corroborated.

Furthermore, the net beta coefficients were examined., and added an additional layer of corroboration to the hypotheses (Figure no. 1).

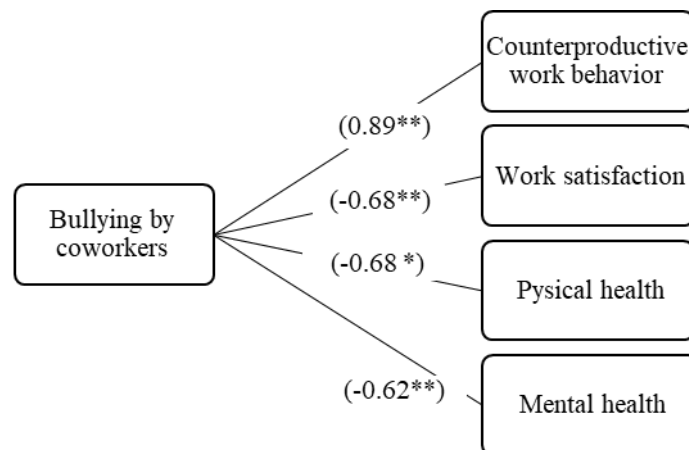


Figure no. 1. Net beta coefficients of association between the study variables

7. Discussion

This study aimed to examine the relationship between coworker abuse and CWB, job satisfaction, and both physical and psychological well-being. We hypothesized that the experience of coworker abuse would affect the victim's behavior, job satisfaction, and general well-being. Addressing this issue is important because the majority of workers' daily interactions are with their coworkers, and relationships between workers and CWB occur on this level. It should be noted that the ex-tant literature has mainly addressed bullying by superiors but not by coworkers. The present study has attempted to fill this lacuna.

The findings show a significant positive relationship between abuse by coworkers and workers' counterproductive behaviors at work, as was reflected in Nielsen and Einarsen's (2018) overview of the literature on workplace bullying. They argued that there is a relationship between bullying and workers' absenteeism, sick leave days, and resignation. Similarly, Hoel, Cooper and Einarsen (2020) found that, on average, bullying victims took seven more days off than others due to dissatisfaction and harassment at work.

The second dimension we examined was job satisfaction, for which a significant negative relationship was found between abuse and satisfaction at work. This finding is supported by Hoel, Cooper and Einarsen (2020), who found that victimized workers reported increased ineffectiveness, social isolation and ostracism, and difficult feelings when they have to cope with abuse. Also, workplace bullying could cause dissatisfaction with life, a desire to quit, and lowered performance of work-related tasks (Boudrias, Trépanier and Salin, 2021).

Next, this study examined how workplace abuse affected physical well-being. The findings indicate a significant negative relationship between coworker abuse and physical well-being. Namely, the more one experiences abuse by colleagues, the more the chances there are of negative effects on one's physical well-being. The literature supports this result. Boudrias, Trépanier and Salin (2021) reported that abuse could lead to muscle pains, headaches, and so on. Kramer (2018) recorded physical implications that included headaches, back pains, eating dis-orders, eating disorders, sleep disorders, as well as cognitive effects such as disorientation, confusion, and lack of concentration. Another study (Gupta, Gupta and Wadhwa, 2020) found cases of deteriorating chronic health conditions, asthma and hypertension. Abuse could also have a detrimental effect on life-threatening chronic diseases (Hogh, Mikkelsen and Hansen, 2020).

Finally, we found that workplace abuse negatively affected psycho-logical wellbeing. Namely, the more one experiences abuse by col-leagues, the more the chances there are of negative effects to one's psychological wellbeing.

Conclusions

Previous studies described that workplace abuse, in which the victim experiences inability to cope with harassment and abuse, has a direct and clear effect on various mental elements, and that abuse is linked to posttraumatic symptoms, depression and anxiety (Nielsen and Einarsen, 2018). Others described workplace abuse as a toxic phenomenon that negatively affects emotions such as low self-confidence and self-esteem, guilt, shame, a sense of worthlessness, and self-deprecation (Hogh, Mikkelsen and Hansen, 2020). Workplace abuse can also cause mood swings, fear, anxiety, and various depression markers (Mikkelsen et al., 2020). Victimized workers have also reported that coping with workplace abuse had left them with internal scars that would take time to heal (Gupta, Gupta and Wadhwa, 2020).

In summary, as hypothesized, we found that workplace abuse affects all of this study's variables. Abuse by coworkers increases the victim's CWB, reduces job satisfaction, and negatively affects the victim's health and psychological well-being.

As is acknowledged, workers' performance enormously impacts an organization's success in a highly competitive world (Amabile, Hadley and Kramer, 2002). We believe it is important to understand the factors that might, either positively or negatively, affect workers' performance and thus the organization's success. Consequently, we recommend nurturing a positive organizational culture, raising awareness, providing adequate tools to eradicate workplace abuse, and implementing deterrence mechanisms that include tools to prevent CWB. We advocate the im-portance of raising public awareness and discourse and protecting workers. On their part, governments must promote relevant legislation to protect workers from workplace abuse.

The main limitation of this study is that most of the variables dealt with sensitive and complex personal issues of inappropriate behaviors, absenteeism, and resignation. CWB in organizations belongs to the 'dark side' that exists under the surface and is not easily revealed. Workers' reluctance to divulge information of this kind makes it difficult to gather information, confirm theoretical models, and explore the phenomenon.

Next, since workplace abuse is considered a process, this work is limited by the fact that all the data were gathered from the same participants and at the same point in time; that is to say, we lacked an indication of the sequence of events. For example, it is possible that a participant is not experiencing abuse in the present, but will experience it in the future, which could change his or her perceptions, or they may be affected by other organizational (such as management style, organizational culture, or social support in the workplace) or personal elements that were not taken into account. A more comprehensive investigation could provide better understanding of the causality mechanism.

Future research could examine additional measures that may affect counterproductive work behaviors such as organizational climate and culture.

We also suggest exploring whether abusive behavior is more prevalent in private organizations than in public ones. We found no support in the literature, but assume that the regulation in public organizations might somewhat reduce the possibilities of abuse.

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