

Understanding Workplace Bullying Through Multidimensional Power Disparities

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ABSTRACT

Power imbalance, has found its due place in the extant literature of workplace bullying, as the centre of the bullying phenomenon (Berlingieri, 2015). These power imbalances may be due to hierarchical position (Vredenburg & Brender, 1998), personality (Nielsen & Knardahl, 2015), gender, race (Attell, Brown, & Treiber, 2017), etc. Further, the literature also concludes that bullying may not necessarily be downward in nature, and that horizontal and upward bullying exist as well (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011). Keeping in mind that the perpetrators may belong to different levels in the organization, and can well be the target's peer or subordinate, it is intriguing to explore the various power sources these perpetrators cling to. Hence, the paper aimed to identify the multidimensional power disparities between perpetrators and targets of workplace bullying. Further, since none of the targets, left the organization, the study also unveils the targets counter actions to reduce power disparity. Seven individuals were interviewed from public sector organizations. Three of participants faced downward bullying while three faced horizontal bullying, the remaining one faced upward bullying. Using constructivist grounded theory, following dimensions of power disparities were identified from the perspective of the targets. 1) Downward bullying – a) Holding that position, 2) Horizontal bullying – a) Overpowering persona, b) Being 'teacher's pet', c) Showing regional superiority, 3) Upward bullying – a) Using the mob power. The counter actions taken by the targets to tackle the power disparity included 1) Countering downward bullying – a) Seeking help from senior witness, b) Waiting for the right moment, 2) Countering horizontal bullying – a) Gaining trust of leader (in the case of 'overpowering persona', b) Grouping against the bully (in the case of 'being teacher's pet') and c) Learning new skills (in the case of 'showing regional superiority' and 3) Countering upward bullying – a) Gaining trust strategically.

Keywords: Constructivist Grounded Theory, Downward Bullying, Mobbing, Peer Bullying, Power Disparity, Power Imbalance, Upward Bullying, Workplace Bullying

1. INTRODUCTION

Workplace bullying, a global epidemic (Farmer, 2011), took researchers by storm since its initial studies in 1990s (see Leymann, 1990; 1996). It involves two parties, one who exhibits bullying

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