Comparing the nature of workplace bullying in two European countries: Portugal and UK

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Abstract

Adult bullying in the workplace has been the focus of systematic international study for the last five years but there are few cross-cultural comparisons of the phenomenon. In this paper, we report the findings from a cross-cultural investigation into employees' perceptions of social and organizational work conditions and experiences of bullying and social exclusion at work. Employees from companies in Portugal and the UK completed the Workplace Relationships Questionnaire (WRQ). We present the results of the analysis of the links between: a) who is bullied and who bullies; b) the extent to which bullying affects victims and non-bullied colleagues. We discuss the differences and similarities between the two countries and some of the benefits that arise from doing cross-cultural research.

Keywords: Adult bullying, bullying in the workplace, aggression, workplace relationships

Introduction

In the past five years, the problem of workplace bullying has been extensively investigated by researchers in Scandinavia (Björkqvist et al, 1994a; Björkqvist et al, 1994b; Einarsen & Raknes, 1991, 1997; Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996; Leymann, 1990, 1996), in Germany and Austria (Niedl, 1995, 1996; Zapf et al, 1996), in Portugal (Almeida, 1992; Lima, Vala & Monteiro, 1994; Monteiro, 1993; Sousa & Vala, 1999; Theotónio & Vala, 1999), in the UK (Adams, 1992; Cowie et al, in press; Crawford, 1997; Quine, 1999; Rayner, 1997; Rayner & Höel, 1997), in Ireland (for example, O'Moore, Seigne, McGuire and Smith); in Australia (McCarthy et al, 1995, Sheehan & Barker, 1999); and in the USA (Brodsky, 1977; Baron et al, 1999; Keashley et al, 1994). The few studies that make direct cross-cultural comparisons highlight the definitional problems that beset this field.

Definitional issues

Rayner and Höel (1997) grouped workplace bullying behaviours into the following types: threat to professional status, threat to personal standing, isolation, overwork and destabilization. Other researchers include in their definitions the concepts of 'relational bullying' in which the bully damages the victim's friendship networks, and 'indirect bullying' (Björkqvist et al., 1994a) perpetrated by a third party, such as rumour spreading. Relational bullying and indirect bullying have in common the expression of social manipulation, and can often go unnoticed by others. Physical bullying or unwanted physical contact have also been included in some studies (Fitzgerald et al, 1997). Factor analyses of questionnaire items have generally yielded some five or six factors, covering concepts similar to those cited by Rayner and Höel but including social isolation, and spreading rumours (Zapf, 1999).

Bullying is usually taken to refer to negative acts directed at a person as an individual; but negative acts can be construed as being related to wider cultural constructs such as gender, or ethnic group; in such cases, terms like sexual harassment or racial harassment may be used. While some degree of repetition is usually thought to characterise bullying, there is no agreement on the extent of frequency and duration needed to define it. Anecdotal accounts (Adams, 1992; Randall, 1997) indicate the belief that a colleague can bully another person without demonstrating regular behavior, for example through even a single threatening act. Einarsen & Skogstad (1996) consider that behaviours that have taken place within the last six months 'now and then' or 'weekly' can be defined as bullying. More stringently, Leymann (1990) suggested a criterion with regard to frequency as being around one incident per week over a period of at least 6 months. Björkqvist and his colleagues (e.g. Björkqvist et al., 1994a) investigate persistent behaviours within the past year. (See Höel et al., 1999, for a further review of these criteria).

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Some imbalance of power is usually thought to characterise bullying. Einarsen and Skogstad (1996, p. 187) argue that a person is bullied if he or she is repeatedly subjected to negative acts in the workplace, adding that 'to be a victim of such bullying one must also feel inferiority in defending oneself in the actual situation'. This means that they do not limit their definition of bullying to a set of 'objectively' predefined negative acts; furthermore, they invoke the subjective experience of the victim. Who decides whether there is an imbalance of power? Einarsen and his colleagues and Rayner & Höel (1997) particularly focus on the victims' perspectives and experiences of the phenomenon of bullying. The measurement of internal and external perspectives on the phenomenon, including the reactions of the victims, their perceived power in relation to the perpetrator, the intent of the perpetrator and the social/organizational contexts in which bullying takes place, are vital considerations in measuring workplace bullying (see also Brodsky, 1977). Additionally, it may be useful to consider a range of perspectives within the same work setting, to include not only victims but also perpetrators and co-workers (Baumeister, 1990).

The values and norms of the workplace (both formal and informal) influence how bullying is defined in that context, how employees interpret situations (for example, as 'bullying' or 'firm management'), and whether bullying is recognized as a problem in the company as a whole.. Einarsen and his colleagues (e.g. Einarsen & Raknes, 1991; Einarsen and Skogstad, 1996) view the culture of the workplace as a form of filter through which behaviours are interpreted and through which a range of behaviours are accepted or tolerated. Sheehan (1998) discusses the impact on the cultural values of an organization when major restructuring, for example downsizing, takes place. Sousa & Vala (1999), in a study about organizational culture, concluded that where management is perceived as fair – in other words, where the predominant set of values in the workplace includes the concept of justice - employees are more receptive to change and are more open in their relationships towards one another. Theotónio and Vala (1999) investigated the influence of organizational culture in the way in which justice and injustice are construed by workers. These studies of workplace values and norms highlight the need to study workplace bullying systemically and at different levels, from individual through to organizational. In the context of the cross-cultural investigation of workplace bullying, these issues are particularly salient.

We argue that the dearth of cross-cultural studies in the field arises from both operational and conceptual differences of definition as well as from concerns about taking true account of contrasting cultural values and organisational practices. For example, the incidence of bullying across cultures varies widely (ranging from 3% to 50%) depending on whether the frequency of bullying is defined as 'within last six months', 'over six months' or 'ever in your career' (Hoel et al, 1999). The highest rates occur when victims label themselves and define the frequency as 'ever in my career'. Leymann estimated that 25% of Swedish workers could experience 'mobbing' at some point in their lives, while, using similar criteria, Rayner found the figure for the UK to be 50%. When stricter definitional criteria were adopted ('once a week for six months'), and where additionally participants identified themselves as victims, Niedl (1995) found an incidence of 7.8% in Austria compared with Leymann's (1990) incidence of 3.5% in Sweden.

Hoel et al predict that, as cultural definitions converge, six months duration will be taken as a criterion, that 'once a week' will be the criterion for frequency, and that the victim's reaction and perceived state will also be taken into account. So, although cross-cultural comparisons are difficult to establish, there is a move towards international collaboration by researchers in the attempt to understand the phenomenon more deeply. For example, the European Union has funded the present study under the Training and Mobility of Researchers initiative 'Bullying and social exclusion in schools and the workplace' with the direct aim of furthering cross-cultural understandings through mutual enquiry and the sharing of expertise.

In the present study, we were very aware of the differences amongst companies in the two European countries involved. Nevertheless, we identified the following commonalities. In each company, there was a concern on the part of Human Resources and senior management about the problem of workplace relationships and a willingness to give researchers access to employees' perspectives on the workplace environment and on the quality of workplace relationships. Additionally, in each research team, following extensive discussions, there was a shared agreement on the definitions of types of bullying, duration and frequency to be used in the investigation. These discussions were on-going throughout the study and led to a shared decision to adopt the Workplace Relationships Questionnaire (WRQ) which, despite slight modifications, was essentially the same in each country. There was also a shared concern to identify the perspectives of victims and non-bullied colleagues. Finally, in each country there was close collaboration and consultation with the Human Resources departments in the companies involved.

Methodology

Participants

This study employed a 54-item self-completion questionnaire (WRQ), which was distributed amongst employees of large international organisations in both the UK and in Portugal.

Data were collected from 386 participants in the UK. Fifty-two percent of the sample was male, and 48% were female. Ages ranged from under 21 years to over 50 years, with fifty-three percent of employees aged between 30 and 50 years of age. Over a quarter of employees were in their current job for less than one year (26.6%), for one to two years 9.7%, for two to five years 27.4%, for five to ten years 8.2%, and for ten years plus 28.2%. Three hundred and fifty-nine participants (94.2 percent) were white; the remaining 5.8% were from ethnic minority groups (Black or Asian).

In Portugal, data were collected from 221 participants. Eighty-two percent (82%) of the sample was male, and 18% were female. Ages ranged from under 18 years to 57 years, with 49% percent of employees aged between 22-30 and 42% in the range 31-40 years. A small number of employees had been in their current job for less than one year (9.5%), for one to two years 20.2%, for two to five years 32.1%, for five to ten years 46.4% and for ten years plus, 1.2%. The majority of participants were white (96.4%); 3.6% were from ethnic minority groups (Black or Asian).

Questionnaire

The questionnaire used in this study consisted of scales measuring work relationship and work environment variables, questions on the experience and perception of bullying in the workplace, and questions relating to demographic characteristics. In this study the following measurements were included:

Bullying behaviour measures. Participants were introduced to the following definition of bullying before answering questions on the experience and perception of bullying in the workplace:

"Bullying is negative behaviour that occurs repeatedly over time and causes distress. It includes:

- threat to professional status (for example, public humiliation, belittling opinion, accusations about lack of effort),
- threat to personal status (for example, offensive remarks, name-calling, insults, intimidation, devaluing with reference to age,
- isolation (for example, physical/social exclusion, preventing access to opportunities, withholding of information,),
- unrealistic workload (for example, impossible tasks and deadlines, unnecessary interruptions),
- destabilisation (for example, removal of responsibilities, failure to give credit when due, meaningless tasks, setting up to fail),
- unwanted physical contact.

To call something bullying the person (or persons) confronted has to experience a feeling of inferiority in defending himself or herself in the situation"

Three measures of bullying were used. 1) Six single questions addressed whether the participant had been subjected to the bullying behaviours outlined in the definition in the last six months. The response options were "no", "seldom", "now and then", "about once a week" and "many times a week". 2) Those participants currently experiencing bullying at work were asked to indicate when the bullying started ("within the last six months", "within the last year", or "over one year"), the status of the perpetrator ("manager", "colleague" and/or "other, please specify") and the strategies used to cope with the bullying. 3) The Bergen Bullying Index, consisting of five items, measured the degree to which bullying is perceived to be a problem at the participant's workplace and for the participant personally. As in previous studies, the Bergen Bullying Index had high internal reliability (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.95) with all item-total correlations above 0.74.

Whilst adjustments were made in the translation from English into Portuguese for cultural and language differences, the two versions of the questionnaire were essentially the same.

Results

Statistical analysis was undertaken in SPSS 9.0 and took the form of a cross-cultural analysis of the demographic characteristics of participants subjected to bullying in the workplace, the status of the perpetrator, and (for the UK sample only) the differences in the perceptions of the quality of the work environment between those who experience bullying and those who perceive bullying.

Factors of age, gender, ethnicity and length of service in relation to being bullied

For the purposes of this study, the victims were defined as those individuals who experienced one or more of the bullying behaviours repeatedly over time.

Of the total UK sample, 84.6% of participants were non-bullied (nevertheless, 47.4% of this group reported some experience of bullying behaviours in the workplace) and 15.4% identified themselves as victims. For 30.5% of the victims, bullying started within the last six months; for 13.6% of victims,

within the last year, and for 55.9% of victims, more than one year ago.

Of the total Portuguese sample, 66.5% of participants were non-bullied (yet in this group, 23% reported some experience of bullying though they did not define themselves as victims) and 33.5% identified themselves as victims. For 31.9% of the victims, bullying started within the last six months; for 21.7% of victims, within the last year, and for 46.4% of victims, more than one year ago.

Pearson's correlations were computed between the total scores of the bullying behaviour questions and the demographic characteristics for the UK and Portuguese sample. The degree of bullying behaviours experienced by the participants in the UK sample correlates significantly with length of current job only. The direction of the correlation suggests that a high degree of experienced bullying is associated with longer length of current job ($r = .272$; $p < 0.01$). The degree of bullying behaviours experienced by the participants in the Portuguese sample correlates significantly with ethnic group only ($r = .200$; $p < 0.05$) suggesting that participants form ethnic minority groups are more likely to experience bullying behaviours.

Categories of bully: managers, peers or others

In the UK sample, nearly half of victims were bullied by their manager (49.2%), a further third (33.9%) were bullied by "other", and 5.1% were bullied by a colleague. In 11.9% of cases the victim was bullied by more than one category of bully (manager, colleague, "other"). In the UK sample, "other" represents the company or the system (46%), another manager (29%), and miscellaneous (25%). In the Portuguese sample, nearly a quarter of victims were bullied by their manager (24.7%), about half were bullied by colleagues (50.7%), 20.5% were bullied by more than one category of bully (manager, colleague, other), and 4% were bullied by "others".

The extent to which bullying is perceived to be a problem in the workplace

In the UK sample, 28% of participants rated bullying as a serious strain in their workplace. Of the total sample, 41.5% of participants said bullying in the workplace reduced their well-being, 40.2% said it reduced their motivation and 39.5% said it reduced their efficiency. In the Portuguese sample, 64% rated bullying as a serious strain in their workplace. Of the total sample, 71.8% said bullying reduced their well-being, 71.9% said it reduced their motivation, and 58.2% said it reduced their efficiency.

Discussion

The proportion of victims in Portugal was twice as high (33.5%) as the UK (15.4%) and there were differences in the groups most vulnerable to bullying (ethnic minorities in Portugal and those who had longer company service in the UK). But a common feature that the study highlighted was that around 50% of victims in each country had endured the bullying for more than a year.

In the UK company we found that half of the victims said that they were bullied by a manager. One third of those bullied reported that they were bullied by "other" of whom around 50% reported that the "other" was "the company" rather than an individual perpetrator. Qualitative data confirmed that in this company there had been considerable change in recent years involving downsizing and an accompanying sense of insecurity amongst the workforce. There were pressures to achieve high levels of efficiency while, at the same time, the company required employees to retain a high quality of service. The fact that a substantial proportion of the respondents had some experience of being bullied despite the fact that they did not identify themselves as victims suggested that employees were using their personal resources to cope with the pressure but that, over time, these resources might well be pushed to the limit.

In the Portuguese sample, by contrast, 50% of victims were bullied by colleagues and one-fifth by more than one category of bully. In this newly-established international company, there was keen competition to retain posts and to achieve promotion, with a resulting atmosphere of on-going pressure on employees. Vulnerable individuals (for example, those from ethnic minority groups) appeared to be most at risk, and the competitive culture seemed to give a mandate to those who wished to abuse their power, whether formal or informal, within the system. Strong individuals or peer-groups would benefit at the expense of their colleagues, but in the long-term this atmosphere might be extremely destructive to the company and employee morale would certainly suffer. This interpretation is confirmed by the high proportion of employees perceiving bullying as a serious strain that reduced well-being, motivation and efficiency. Where bullying is perpetrated by colleagues, the behaviour is likely to be much more visible by larger numbers of people; it is probably more intense and the impact on victims more obvious. Here the Portuguese data gave useful insights into the parallel UK findings.

In the course of carrying out the analyses, we also discovered a new category of employee affected by the problem of bullying. These were individuals

who had experienced bullying behaviour but did not identify themselves as victims. Predictably, victims perceived bullying as a serious problem in their workplace. However, those who had experienced bullying behaviours but did not define themselves as victims were also affected, and perceived their workplace more negatively than those who were not ever bullied. Again, the cross-cultural collaboration enabled us to identify this group of employees and suggested new avenues for future research.

Specific guidance could be offered to each company on the basis of these findings. The UK results suggest that there is an urgent need for management to demonstrate more effective communication and interpersonal relationships skills. There was also a need for the company to develop policies to integrate the achievement of high performance with a greater evidence of personal support for employees. By contrast, in the Portuguese company, there is a need to develop structures that enhance peer co-operation and that support disadvantaged groups.

At a more general level, the present study indicates the great value that there is in carrying out cross-cultural research, despite difficulties of language and distance. By working together with colleagues from a different culture, researchers find that established assumptions are likely to be challenged. In this case, we discovered a category of employee that has experienced bullying behaviour, does not identify as a victim, yet appears to perceive the work environment negatively. This group, that has the strength to withstand bullying and also shows awareness of the problem, may hold the key to a resolution regardless of culture. Finally, the experience of carrying out this study has confirmed for us the value of examining the problem of workplace bullying systemically in its social and cultural context.

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