



# Workplace Bullying in Malaysia: An Exploratory Study

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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims at investigating the prevalence of workplace bullying and the frequency of its negative acts in Malaysia. Bullying in the workplace was measured using the Negative Acts Questionnaire (NAQ-R) developed by Einarsen *et al* (2003). A sample of 231 randomly selected respondents participated in the study. They represented both the public and private sectors, and several industry and job levels.

The frequency of the negative acts (now and then, monthly, weekly, daily), excluding never, revealed shocking numbers. Among the different forms of bullying, the results indicated that 81.4% were being bullied by someone withholding information that affected their performance, 82.2% were being bullied by someone spreading gossip about them, and 82.3% were being bullied by being given tasks with unreasonable deadlines.

**Key Words:** *workplace bullying, negative acts, Malaysia*

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Workplace bullying is considered a severe form of anti-social behaviour. According to O'Driscoll, Cooper-Thomas, Bentley, Catley, Gardner, and Trenberth (2011), this behaviour is a major issue among employees and in organizations. Bullying can be identified by the occurrence of harmful physical or verbal behaviour that is repeated regularly. The individual or group being targeted is usually less powerful than the bully and lacks the ability to take a defensive position. Greenberg (2011) defines workplace bullying as the repeated mistreatment of an individual at work in a manner that endangers his or her physical or mental health. Workplace bullying can occur in many forms, and can involve the use of insulting comments, yelling, screaming, and cursing. Greenberg (2011) identified recent statistics showing that 1 in 6 workers in the United States had been a victim of bullying in the previous year. Statistics also show that 81 percent of bullies in the workplace are bosses and that the targets of bullying are usually women.

O'Driscoll *et al.* (2011) identified workplace bullying as becoming a major concern, not only between workers and in organizations, but also in government agencies. Studies have reported the seriousness of the negative consequences of bullying. For instance, Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, and Cooper (2003) reported that workplace bullying is a more crippling and devastating problem for employees than all other kinds of work-related stress put together.

Although the prevalence of workplace bullying in various countries has been explored in several studies, the majority of these studies have been conducted in Scandinavia and other European countries (O'Driscoll *et al.*, 2011). There is little evidence from countries such as Malaysia and the present study, therefore, intends to explore this issue in the Malaysian workplace.

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

As presented earlier, workplace bullying is a widespread phenomenon in most organizations. According to Namie (2003), this form of anti-social behaviour crosses boundaries of gender, race, and organizational rank. He also mentions that in most studies, workplace bullying would score a 4 to 9 on a scale of 1 to 10 for forms of unpleasant behaviour (with 1 being the least unpleasant form of behaviour and 10 being the most unpleasant). The phenomenon of workplace bullying is responsible for many negative consequences, ranging from mild to severe harm, to physical violence that can result in death. According to Namie (2003), research about bullying was first initiated in the 1980s by a German psychiatrist, Heinz Leymann, who created an anti-bullying movement. Prior to the coining of the term "workplace bullying" in 1992 by British journalist Andrea Adams, workplace bullying was referred to as "mobbing". LaVan and Martin (2008) mentioned that workplace bullying had been studied under a variety of terms, including employee abuse, workplace aggression, victimization, interpersonal deviance, social undermining, and workplace incivility.

## 3.0 WHAT IS WORKPLACE BULLYING?

Workplace bullying has been defined in several ways. Leymann (1996) defined it as "psychological terror or mobbing in working life that involves hostile and unethical communication, which is directed in a systematic way by one or a few individuals mainly towards one individual who,

due to mobbing, is pushed into a helpless and defenceless position, being held there by means of continuing mobbing activities.” Leymann (1996) said that this anti-social behaviour could be called bullying if it lasts for six months or more. Such behaviour, over a long duration, causes psychological, psychosomatic, and social misery.

Einarsen *et al.* (2003) maintained that bullying at work means harassing, offending, or socially excluding someone, or negatively affecting someone’s work tasks. In order for the bullying (or mobbing) label to be applied to a particular activity, interaction or process, the action has to occur repeatedly and regularly (e.g., weekly) and over a period of time (e.g., 6 months). Bullying is an escalating process during the course of which the person confronted ends up in an inferior position and becomes the target of systematic negative social acts. A conflict cannot be called bullying, however, if the incident is an isolated event, or if two parties of approximately equal “strength” are in conflict.

### 3.1 CHARACTERISTICS OF BULLYING

According to Namie (2003), “regardless of how bullying is manifested, [through] either verbal assaults or strategic moves to render the target unproductive and unsuccessful, it is the aggressor’s desire to control the target that motivates the action”. He opined that regardless of how prevalent bullying is in the workplace, it is not triggering anger or opposition from society. Research shows that this is due to the fear of victims that results in silence and stops them from reporting the problem. Usually the person that the victim reports to (the boss) is the bully.

Research shows that bullying does not necessarily involve people from different genders or races. In fact, most reported bullying incidents involve people of the same sex and gender as the victim. Namie (2003) mentions that only 25 percent of bullying cases involve perpetrators of a different gender. He also mentions some characteristics of workplace bullying; according to him, it is nearly invisible, non-physical and psychological violence, both in its nature and impact. As such, bullies can easily get away with it.

According to scholars (Mikkelsen and Einarsen, 2001; Salin, 2001; Hoel, Cooper, and Faragher, 2001; Zapf, Knorz, and Kulla, 1996), some common features of bullying in organizations include:

- There are multiple negative acts and repeated forms of abuse.
- The negative acts are frequent.
- The bullying occurs over a period of time of longer than a week (researchers have set a period of six months).
- There is a power distance or disparity between the bully and the victim.

### 3.2 WHO ARE BULLIES?

Namie (2003) maintained that the characteristic common to all bullies is that they are controlling competitors who exploit their cooperative targets. Most bullies would stop if the rules changed and bullying was punished. Greenberg (2011) and Namie (2003) put bullies into four categories:

- 1) *The Screaming Mimi* always controls the emotions of others by expressing anger. Expressing anger includes screaming, yelling, cursing, and throwing objects on the ground.

- 2) *The Constant Critic* criticizes others by insulting them. Insulting includes uttering mean comments, name-calling, lecturing others and reminding them of their incompetence.
- 3) *The Two-Headed Snake* is usually ranked high in the organization and enjoys manipulating people below him/her. This includes denying employees the necessary resources to work with, spreading rumours about them and turning them against each other, and assigning meaningless jobs to employees to punish them.
- 4) *The Gatekeeper* is obsessed with control. He/she punishes employees by isolating and ignoring them with “the silent treatment”, and allocates time, money, and evidence of information to ensure the failure of others. He/she then uses this as an excuse to blame them for poor company performance. Namie (2003) said that one bully actually set office hours in such a way that everybody seemed to come in late or leave early.

### 3.3 PREVALENCE OF WORKPLACE BULLYING IN MALAYSIA

Few studies have addressed the issue of this anti-social behaviour in Malaysia. Patah, Abdullah, Zahari, and Radzi (2010) published a study about workplace bullying experiences, emotional dissonance and subsequent intentions to pursue a career in the hospitality industry. The study involved Malaysian diploma holders training at different hotels in Malaysia. Findings showed the significant impact of workplace bullying on the trainees’ subsequent career intentions and the emotional dissonance of their experiences. Another study by Yahaya, Ing, Lee, Yahaya, Boon, and Hashim (2012) investigated the impact of workplace bullying on work performance. A Negative Acts Questionnaire of workplace bullying was distributed to 217 employees at a plastics manufacturing company in Melaka, Malaysia. Data analysis revealed a significant negative relationship between workplace bullying and job performance. Writing an essay on this subject in a Malaysian newspaper, Yeen (2002) posited that victims of workplace bullying in Malaysia may not have physical injuries, but they are suffering from pain that runs inside them. The situation at the workplace, the author mentions, is very similar to the typical schoolyard where little kids are bullied. The article also suggests that victims of workplace bullying in Malaysia fall into a number of categories.

The first category is Newbies, or newcomers in other words. People in this group are bullied because they have not formed relationships with others yet. They also are bullied because people think of them as being easier to bully, as there is no one to stand up for them or support them. In addition, newcomers are bullied because others think of them as threats, or competition in the work environment.

The second category is Veterans. The article suggests that employees in Malaysia with long work experience (especially those about to retire) also report incidents of workplace bullying. However, victims of bullying with longer work experience are less affected emotionally either during or after being bullied.

According to Yeen (2012), Malaysians in the workplace can become targets for bullies if they:

- Have at least one vulnerability that can be exploited;
- Are different from others;
- Are conscientious, quiet achievers, good at their job, are agreeable and well-liked;
- Show independence of thought or deed;

- Get more attention from others than the bully does;
- Have inappropriate social skills and have annoyed the bully;
- Are unassertive and prefer to avoid conflict;
- Have a dispute with the bully; and
- Are just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

#### 4.0 THE STUDY

The present study aims to explore the issue of workplace bullying in Malaysia. The study survey employed a 22-item Negative Acts Questionnaire (NAQ-R) developed by Einarsen *et al* (2003). The 22 items describe negative behaviours that employees may encounter in the workplace. For instance, one item is “Being ignored or facing a hostile reaction when you approach”. Respondents were asked to choose from a five-point scale describing the frequency of the act, with responses ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (daily). The construct of measuring bullying requires greater measurement sensitivity, which is why the five-point scale was used instead of the three-point scale. Frequency analysis was conducted to understand how often employees in Malaysia are bullied. The questionnaires were distributed to employees working in different organisations through personal contact, as well as through online surveys. Some 231 usable surveys were returned.

#### 4.1 BACKGROUND PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

A good percentage of respondents (18.2%) worked in customer service, while the smallest percentage (3.5%) worked for health institutions and in personal care. There were more female respondents (56.3%) than males (43.7%), and the largest percentage of respondents (42.9%) fell into the 21 to 30 age group. Only 5.6% of respondents belonged to the 51 and above age category. Some 27.3% of respondents were executives, followed by managers (26.4%) and consultants (1.7%). A majority of respondents (43.3%) had work experience of between 6 and 10 years, while only 4.8% of respondents had 21 years or more of work experience. The analysis of the responses regarding the respondents’ backgrounds could imply that those who work in customer service are usually the most bullied, that younger employees are bullied more than older employees, and that new employees (or those with less experience) are mostly being bullied. This supports the results of earlier literature, which found that newcomers are bullied the most because they have not formed any relationships with others (Yeen, 2012).

#### 4.2 RESULTS

The frequency analysis of negative acts of workplace bullying shows serious and severe situations that employees repeatedly have to bear at workplaces in Malaysia. Table 1 generally suggests that most employees never experience any negative behaviour at their workplace. However, 39% of respondents who reported facing negative behaviour now and then said that someone at the workplace was withholding information that affected their performance, 34.6% indicated that someone was spreading gossip about them, 32% said that they were being shouted at or were the target of spontaneous anger, 52.4% said that their opinions were ignored, 53.2% said that they had been given tasks with unreasonable deadlines, and 18.2% of respondents admitted that they had received threats of violence or physical or actual abuse at work.

Respondents reported facing the following behaviours on a monthly basis: 25.1% of employees were being ordered to do work below their level of competence, 29% said that gossip was being spread about them, 25.5% of employees were being reminded of their errors and mistakes, and 28.1% were being pressured to not claim something which, by right, they were entitled to.

The most common negative behaviours employees faced on a weekly basis included someone withholding information that affected their performance (16.9%) and being ordered to do work below their level of competence (18.6%). Another 19.5% of respondents said that they had been insulted and offended with remarks regarding their person, attitude, or private life.

Being bullied on a daily basis is the most severe kind of abuse, and can result in serious damage to an employee. Some 5.6% of respondents said that key areas of responsibility had been taken away from them or replaced with more trivial or unpleasant tasks, and that gossip was being spread about them. Another 5.2% of respondents reported receiving insulting behaviour daily. Although the low percentages indicate that only a handful of employees are being bullied daily, it does not mean they should be ignored; this is a serious workplace problem, and those responsible for the bullying should be stopped and punished.

**TABLE 1: PERCENTAGE OF NEGATIVE BEHAVIOUR BY FREQUENCY OF OCCURRENCE**

Negative behaviour	Never	Now and then	Monthly	Weekly	Daily	Total
1. Someone withholding information which affects your performance	18.6	39.0	23.8	16.9	1.7	81.4
2. Being humiliated or ridiculed in connection with your work	41.1	26.8	19.5	12.6	0	58.9
3. Being ordered to do work below your level of competence	27.3	27.7	25.1	18.6	1.3	72.7
4. Having key areas of responsibility removed or replaced with more trivial or unpleasant tasks	39.4	17.7	22.1	15.2	5.6	60.6
5. Spreading gossip about you	17.7	34.6	29.0	13.0	5.6	82.2
6. Being ignored or excluded	43.3	22.5	16.0	13.9	4.3	56.7
7. Having insulting or offensive remarks made about your person, attitudes, or private life	47.2	13.0	20.3	19.5	0	52.8
8. Being shouted at or being the target of spontaneous anger	30.7	32.0	23.8	10.0	3.5	69.3
9. Insulting behaviour	45.5	26.0	17.7	5.6	5.2	54.5
10. Hints or signals from others that you should quit your job	53.2	18.2	21.6	5.2	1.7	46.7
11. Repeated reminders of your errors or mistakes	29.9	32.0	25.5	10.4	2.2	40.1
12. Being ignored or facing a hostile reaction when you approach	26.4	36.4	24.7	10.8	1.7	73.6
13. Repeated criticism with respect to your work and effort	32.9	37.7	7.8	17.7	3.9	66.7
14. Having your opinions ignored	20.3	52.4	13.4	12.1	1.7	79.6
15. Practical jokes carried out by people you do not get along with	36.4	34.2	19.0	10.4	0	63.6
16. Being given tasks with unreasonable deadlines	17.7	53.2	12.6	12.6	3.9	82.3
17. Having allegations made against you	45.9	32.0	11.3	9.1	1.7	54.1
18. Excessive monitoring of your work	32.9	36.4	17.7	8.7	4.3	67.1
19. Pressure to not claim something to which by right you are entitled to	37.2	28.6	28.1	3.9	2.2	62.8
20. Being the subject of excessive teasing and sarcasm	45.9	24.2	15.2	12.6	2.2	54.2
21. Being exposed to unmanageable workload	29.0	37.2	20.3	9.5	3.9	70.9
22. Threats of violence or physical or actual abuse	75.8	18.2	2.6	3.5	0	24.3

## 5.0 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As shown in Table 1, the total of the frequencies of the negative acts (now and then, monthly, weekly, daily), excluding never, reveal shocking numbers. Some 81.4% of Malaysian employees are being bullied by someone withholding information that affects their performance. Similarly, 82.2% of employees are being bullied by someone spreading gossip about them. Furthermore, 82.3% of employees are being bullied by being given tasks with unreasonable deadlines. Other high percentages of bullying behaviour can be observed in Table 1.

As discussed earlier, although this phenomenon occurs repeatedly, it is not triggering anger or opposition from society. Research shows that this is due to the fear of victims that results in silence and stops them from reporting the problem. Usually, the one the employee reports to (i.e., the boss) is the bully (Namie, 2003). What makes bullying in the workplace so prevalent is that it is not seen as illegal and, consequently, bullies easily get away with their behaviour. Due to the dangerous effects that bullying can have on employees, organizations and senior managers in Malaysia need to take action to confront this widespread phenomenon. They are advised to be aware of negative and inappropriate behaviour that can negatively affect their employees, and to develop handbooks and guides to spread awareness of workplace bullying. In addition, they should conduct training programs to teach employees how to react when being bullied. Overall, they must establish a healthy workplace where employees respect one another, and should develop procedures whereby employees can report any form of bullying or harassment to top management so immediate corrective action can be taken.

## 5.1 LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The measurement tool of workplace bullying, the Negative Acts Questionnaire, is argued to have limitations. For instance, it only assesses and reports the frequency of bullying behaviours (as seen in the analysis), and it does not measure the severity of these behaviours and their impact on employees. For example, a bullying behaviour may not happen frequently, but it may cause great damage to the victim.

Further studies are suggested to examine the antecedents and consequences of workplace bullying.

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