MANAGING INSTRUMENTAL COMMUNICATION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE PERCEPTION OF BULLYING AMONG NEW EMPLOYEES

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Introduction/background: Researchers have indicated that organizational change may indirectly affect workplace bullying. In the case of employees undergoing organizational change, the same stressors might be experienced only by new employees.

Aim of the paper: The aim of the article is to identify whether work experience in the organization intensifies subjective perception of bullying in the process of instrumental communication and receiving negative feedback.

Materials and methods: Relational and phenomenological methods were applied. Multi-phase mixed methods research included; shadowing, participant observation, discourse analysis, semi structured interviews, oral history interviews. Qualitative data (n = 67) gathered in the first stage in longitudinal studies was transformed into a questionnaire used in quantitative research (n = 267) in the second research stage.

Results and conclusions: The findings indicate that improper conditions for decision realization, inadequate individualization of instructions and poor feedback intensify the subjective experience of bullying. Perceived bullying in the process of instrumental communication decreases with longer work experience within the given organization and not with overall work experience.

Keywords: Bullying, mobbing, organizational change, organizational learning, employee socialization.

Introduction

Companies need to plan and implement organizational change to remain more competitive or to simply survive in the marketplace. The process of planned change is in fact "managed learning" (Schein, 1999). Due to the complexity and volatility of the economic environment, the attainment of long–run equilibrium remains highly unlikely (Simon, 1959, p. 263). Organizations are oriented towards achieving targets (Levitt & March, 1988, p. 320). "Their behavior depends on the relation between the outcomes they observe and the aspirations they have for those outcomes" (Levitt & March, 1988, p. 320). People are faced with similar

choices when they wish to improve their career prospects and decide to change their place of employment. Employees are willing to take action when they expect it will lead to desirable outcomes (Vroom, 1964). Although, job description and employment contract outline the expectations of both the employer and the new employee, it is impossible to predict all the possible outcomes of the decision due to both the inability to imagine all of them, as well as limited information (Simon, 1957). Thus, the new place of employment is a change in professional life that might result both in positive and negative outcomes. However, the process of experiencing negative aspects of change is significantly stronger than in case of positive (Kahneman & Tversky, 2013). Researchers have indicated that organizational change increases the risk of the occurrence of workplace bullying (McCarthy, 1996; McCarthy, 2001; Hutchinson et al., 2005; Skogstad et al., 2007; Baillien & De Witte, 2009; D'Cruz et al., 2014). Newly employed staff might experience similar negative outcomes as that of employees working in companies going through organizational change because they both undergo a process of change in their professional careers.

Workplace bullying is "the systemic persecution of a colleague, a subordinate or a superior which, if continued, can cause severe social, psychological and psychosomatic problems for the victim" (Einarsen, 1999, p. 17). Over the past few years, the word "bullying", along with other related concepts, have started to appear in the public sphere more frequently. The terms: "harassment" (Brodsky, 1976), "mobbing" (Leymann, 1990), "bullying" (Adams & Bray, 1992), "victimization" (Olweus, 1994), "emotional abuse" (Keashly & Harvey, 2005), and "workplace aggression" (Baron & Neuman, 1996) are no longer solely reserved for scientists. Extensive research has raised public awareness of the phenomenon of workplace bullying (Vartia & Leka, 2011; Hanley & O'Rourke, 2016). Due to its negative connotation, 'bullying at work' has become a signifier that gives expression to a variety of anxieties, fears and resentment (McCarthy, 2002). Researchers have, however, identified discrepancies in subjective perception of bullying (Veenstra et al., 2007; Tolsma et al., 2013; Tatum & Grund, 2020). Indeed, the term devised to protect bullying victims can become a tool to bully others. The fact that an employee declares having subjectively experienced bullying does not mean that objectively any bullying has actually occurred (Einarsen, 1999). However, it is the subjective perception that has constituted bullying as an objective phenomenon, as it lies at the core of its definition (Brodsky, 1976; Niedl, 1996). In either case, bullying victims reported subjective perception of lowered work productivity and decreased creativity (Bassman, 1992; Einarsen, Hoel, & Cooper, 2003; Mete & Sökmen, 2016). Moreover, organizations reported financial losses, especially due to absenteeism and prolonged sick leaves of both victims and witnesses of workplace bullying (Hoel, Einarsen, et al., 2002; Pranjić et al., 2006; Beardwell & Claydon, 2010; Hoel et al., 2020).

Research aims

The purpose of the research is to verify whether work experience within a specific organization influences the subjective perception of respondents in order to identify which functions of communication process that might be associated with bullying by staff with less than 1 year work experience in the organization. Workplace bullying refers to systematic negative acts with intent to harm, that occur over a period of at least six months (Einarsen, 2000). Victims are forced into inferior positions and are unable to defend themselves (Leymann, 1996). However, the 'intent to harm' due to its ambiguity is difficult to prove, and it is frequently not included in definitions (Hoel et al., 1999; Zapf & Einarsen, 2005; Nielsen et al., 2016; Escartin et al., 2017; Rai & Agarwal, 2018; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018).

C. Brodsky stressed that bullying is a systemic phenomenon that can only exist within a culture wherein it is permitted (Brodsky, 1976). Several authors point out that there might be structural and systemic aspects to certain behaviors and Employees who bully might simply conform to norms without intending to harm anyone (Bassman, 1992; Keashly, 2001; Keashly & Jagatic, 2002).

Organizations learn through the experience of individuals, however, organizational learning is not simply the sum of each member's learning (Mitroff & Kilmann, 1976; Hedberg, 1981). Organizations develop learning systems that not only influence their immediate members, but are also transmitted to new members by way of organization histories, norms, ideologies and routines (Fiol & Lyles, 1985).

Routines are independent of individual employees who execute them and are able to survive considerable turnover in these employees (Levitt & March, 1988). The sense of stability and strong emotional identification with norms and values translates into employee loyalty with the company (Van Maanen & Kunda, 1989). However, certain authors have pointed out that loyalty and sense of stability make organizational change much more difficult, as it intensifies the feeling of uncertainty which was previously decreased by the sense of stability (Jaques, 1957; Stacey, 1995; Huy, 1999, p. 337). Furthermore, rapid technological changes force top, middle and operational managers to redefine their roles, which no longer provides predictability in relational exchanges (Friedman & Podolny, 1992; Huff et al., 1992).

Contested belief structures and tensions associated with the difference in norms and priorities as to which role to enact might result in strategic role conflict (Walsh & Fahey, 1986; Floyd & Lane, 2000). Most common reasons for resistance to change are, among others, negative rumor – mongering, fear of the unknown, disorientation, pace of change, lack of communication, loss of autonomy, threats to power or influence, habits, unpredictability, knowledge and skill obsolescence, selective perception, economic implications (Coch & French Jr, 1948; Lawrence, 1968; Powell & Posner, 1978; Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979; Mullins, 2007; Robbins & Judge, 2009; Yilmaz & Kiliçouglu, 2013; Lewin, 2016; Krügel & Traub, 2018).

Numerous authors indicate that organizational change may indirectly affect workplace bullying through stressors such as increased job insecurity, workload, role conflict, role ambiguity, autocratic leadership style, personal conflict, deterioration of bonds between coworkers, reduction of leader credibility, anticipation of job loss (McCarthy, Sheehan, & Kearns, 1995; McCarthy, 1996; Greenglass & Burke, 2001; Hoel, Cooper, et al., 2002; Hoel & Salin, 2002; Skogstad et al., 2007; Baillien & De Witte, 2009).

Just as in the case of employees undergoing organizational change, the same resistance to change mechanisms and stressors might be experienced by newly employed staff. For instance, the trial period is associated with decreased job security, especially due to the short notice period (Hora et al., 2016). Initial experience of new employees is imperative in adjusting to the new environment (Fogarty, 1992; Saks & Ashforth, 1997; Robinson & O'Leary-Kelly, 1998). However, new employees, either consciously or unconsciously, will inevitably experience either positive or negative conflict (Jehn, 1997). If new employees' roles are not defined in a comprehensible way, newly employed staff might experience role ambiguity and role conflict (Judeh, 2011). As a consequence, employees might not understand why their work is corrected and whether their work will be acceptable to their superior (Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970, p. 156). In addition, new employees in the process of socialization might experience role conflict and role ambiguity due to change of behavior as a function of the new situation. They might feel they have to perform duties in a different way that they should be performed (Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970, p. 156). Several authors stress that role ambiguity leads to tensions, feeling of helplessness, cognitive distortions among new employees due to insufficient information necessary to perform tasks (Hamilton, 2003; Onyemah, 2008; Judeh, 2011).

According to some researchers, role conflict, role ambiguity and stress are inevitable in the process of socialization and organizational change (Harvey & Evans, 1994; Jehn, 1995; Jahanzeb, 2010; Singh & Mishra, 2012; Karunanithi & Ponnampalam, 2013; Zhang & Huo, 2015). Others argue that harmful stress, conflicts and bullying are the result of inadequate work organization (Karasek & Theorell, 1990; Gilbreath, 2004, p. 97; Zapf, 1999; Cox & Rial-González, 2002; Leka et al., 2003; Redfern et al., 2008).

Researching workplace bullying gives rise to two propositions:

- **H1:** Inadequate individualization of instruction in the process of instrumental communication will be positively correlated with perceived bullying.
- **H2:** Creating improper conditions for effective decision realization in the process of instrumental communication will be positively correlated with perceived bullying.
- E. Schein puts forward that "all forms of learning and change start with some form of dissatisfaction or frustration generated by data that disconfirm our expectations and hopes" (Schein, 1999, p. 60). The less competent people are, the more they tend to overestimate their performance (Darwin, 1871; Kruger & Dunning, 1999). Moreover, incompetent people suffer a dual burden: "not only do they reach erroneous conclusions and make unfortunate choices, but their incompetence robs them of the ability to realize it" (Kruger & Dunning, 1999).

J. Kruger and D. Dunning found that incompetent people are also unable to recognize competence in others (Kruger & Dunning, 1999). Thus, employees might question their immediate superiors and senior colleagues credibility (Kieżun & Kwiatkowski, 1975; Szymański, 2018).

In order to avoid unnecessary conflict, superiors might implement structural empowerment which provides employees with autonomy and control over their work (Seibert et al., 2011; Ayala Calvo & Garcia, 2018; Amor et al., 2020). Structural empowerment has been positioned as a necessary, but not sufficient, antecedent of psychological empowerment (Mathieu & Taylor, 2006). Several authors stress that empowerment needs to be adjusted not only to employees expectations, but also to the level of their competence, otherwise they will become dissatisfied and overburdened with their work (Nowakowski & Szmidt, 1984; Maynard et al., 2012; Cheong et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2018; Cheong et al., 2019). Even more qualified and experienced staff felt that empowering leaders lacked interest in their work and perceived their leadership style as laissez faire (Wong & Giessner, 2018, p. 777). Employees with more autonomy are forced to process additional information, as they are responsible not only for realizing tasks, but also for deciding on the manner and time of their implementation (Rubinstein et al., 2001). They require proportionally more time to complete tasks than do employees who simply follow their supervisor's guidelines (Rubinstein et al., 2001). Consequently, employees who make complex decisions and take responsibility for the obtained results might perceive autonomy as an undesirable factor and associate it only with additional duties (Spector et al., 1988; Langfred & Moye, 2004, p. 936).

Perceived high workload had direct negative relationship with new employees' job satisfaction (Russ-Eft, 2001). Additionally, research indicates increased levels of stress and insecurity in employees who perform tasks independently (Langfred & Moye, 2004). Thus, empowering leadership does not always provide better results than does a more directive style of leadership (Staw & Epstein, 2000). Moreover, bullies can use pseudo transformational and pseudo democratic leadership styles, as they are usually perceived positively by their coworkers as they provide them with the illusions of inspiration and participation in the decision process (Barling et al., 2008, pp. 852-853; Auvinen et al., 2013, p. 25; Niesche & Thomson, 2017, p. 194). Therefore, particular authors indicate that superiors should apply autocratic or paternalistic leadership style when employees are either unfamiliar or lack know-how about their jobs (Wong & Page, 2003; Iqbal et al., 2015). However, while autocratic leadership style can boost productivity, it decreases satisfaction (Lewin et al., 1939; Foels et al., 2000; Appelbaum et al., 2004; Al-Ababneh, 2013).

A further two propositions then arise:

H3: Inadequate individualization of feedback in the process of instrumental communication will be positively correlated with perceived bullying.

H4: Perceived bullying in the process of instrumental communication will be negatively correlated with longer work experience in the organization.

According to H. Simon, people who have accepted employment in a company and the authority relationship with the employer which the employment contract entails, willingly permitted their behavior to be determined to some extent by their employer (Simon, 1979, p. 502). Additionally, holding an employment contract reduces uncertainty and allows employees to predict how their work will look like – which in turn might reduce their intention to look for other employment alternatives (Simon, 1951; March et al., 1964, pp. 155-172).

Research has indicated that time spent in a particular department or function develops a viewpoint that is consistent with the activities and goals of that department or particular function (Dearborn & Simon, 1958; Walsh, 1988, p. 875). Regular exposure to the same microcosm might foster a readiness in individuals to view their broader organizational worlds in a special light ((Dearborn & Simon, 1958; Walsh, 1988, p. 875). For example, nurses through the linked process of splitting, projection and introjection, lend their individual and collective authority to ritual, which in turn authorizes them to behave in a depersonalized way towards their patients (Hirschhorn, 1988, p. 3). Splitting is a cognitive mechanism based on dichotomous black and white judgments, with inability to see both sides simultaneously (Freud, 1941; Myers & Zeigler-Hill, 2008). According to S. Freud, splitting helps to reduce anxieties associated with ambivalence of more complex and integrated evaluations (Freud, 1941; Myers & Zeigler-Hill, 2008). Nurses, therefore, often allow the practice they had once created to dominate them and followed orders regardless of patients' needs (Hirschhorn, 1988, p. 3).

Behavior in an organization is primarily based on routines, which in turn are based on interpretations of the past more than anticipations of the future (Lindblom, 1959, p. 79; Cyert & March, 1963; Nelson & Winter, 1982). Organizational action is history-dependent, it stems from a logic of appropriateness or legitimacy more than consequentiality or intention (Steinbruner, 1974; Levitt & March, 1988, p. 320). It involves matching procedures to situations more than it does calculating choices (Steinbruner, 1974; Levitt & March, 1988, p. 320). As a result, it might lead to problems of perceptual screens, personal bias, collective blindness, tunnel vision and functional fixedness (Cyert & March, 1963; Stagner, 1969; Turner, 1976; Mason & Mitroff, 1981; Katz, 1982).

Suboptimal information processing among employees might lead to heuristic and cognitive biases such as associative principles, retainment principle, focus principle, attentional bias, attentional tunneling, overconfidence, optimism bias and confirmation bias (Wason, 1968; DeJoy, 1989; Thomson, 2000; Wickens & Alexander, 2009; Dunning & Story, 1991; Furnham & Boo, 2011; Korteling et al., 2018). Moreover, people frequently do not expect regression in many contexts where it is bound to occur (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974).

D. Kahneman and A. Tversky point out that failure to recognize regression can have pernicious consequences (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). If experienced supervisors notice that praise for good performance is typically followed by poor performance the next day, while punishment after bad performance is typically followed by good performance, they might conclude that praise is detrimental to good performance, while punishment is beneficial to good

performance (Kahneman & Tversky, 1973, pp. 250-251). Consequently, superiors will be rewarded for punishing someone, and punished for rewarding someone (Kahneman & Tversky, 1973, pp. 250-251). Still, a bully or a hypersensitive managers might have gone unnoticed 10 years ago in organizations, nowadays through open criticism and repeated punishments, he/she would easily attract attention (Cameron & Green, 2019, p. 166). Bullies, consequently, are forced to use more sophisticated methods such as knowledge sabotage which involves hiding information needed to perform a task or intentionally misinforming colleagues in order to discredit them and/or prevent them from performing their tasks efficiently (Serenko, 2020, pp. 740-741).

Manipulating information enables workplace bullies not only to harm both colleagues and employers, but also increases the likelihood of avoiding consequences and retaliation (Serenko, 2019, pp. 1270). 'Knowledge hiding' is an intentional action of not disclosing information which can be destructive to the individual trying to obtain it (Connelly et al., 2012, p. 65). 'Knowledge withholding' is an action of not disclosing information which can be destructive to individuals and/or the organization (Lin & Huang, 2010). Researchers emphasize that this does not have to be intentional, because the employee may not be aware of the fact that withholding certain pieces of information may be destructive to individuals and/or the organization (Pan et al., 2018).

Incompetence or the intention to harm may be equally destructive to the individual and the organization within the context of perception of workplace bullying. 'Knowledge hoarding' is a strategic, intentional, destructive action of not disclosing information to colleagues trying to obtain it (Evans et al., 2015). Additionally, the phenomenon of 'knowledge hoarding' involves deliberate hiding of information. This can be destructive to the organization. However, the existence and importance of the expert knowledge is not known to anyone except the person concealing it (Evans et al., 2015). Expert knowledge can be a source of power because it can reduce organizational uncertainty (Crozier et al., 1982, p. 83-85). Additionally, in the absence of support from colleagues and/or superiors, 'knowledge hoarding' seems to be the only way of defense for bullying victims (Serenko, 2019, p. 1270-1271).

Until the organization either begins to incur financial losses or qualified employees decide to resign, the employer might, either knowingly or unknowingly, tolerate bullying acts of tyrannical and disloyal managers (Kelloway et al., 2010, p. 20). Researchers stress that regular possibility of direct contact between managers responsible for making strategic decisions and their employees could partly prevent knowledge hoarding and hiding (Butt, 2020). In the era of new technologies, skillful building of trust becomes of paramount importance, it allows the company not only to develop, but also control incompetent and dishonest employees to prevent 'knowledge spillover' (Klincewicz, 2012, p. 190; Arain et al., 2019, p. 26; Latusek-Jurczak, 2020).

Methods

Data was gathered in the course of 3 stage multiphase mixed method research sessions (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). During semi-structured interviews, respondents provided their lived experience in the form of idiosyncratic accounts of behaviors and factors that cause discomfort in their workplace (Husserl, 1970; Janowitz, 1972; Sanders, 1982; Van Manen, 2016; Crowther et al., 2017). In addition, they revealed their personal strategies for realizing their professional goals within their organizations (Bourdieu, 2013; Mohr, 2013). The phenomenological approach enabled to obtain a list of behaviors which were qualified as bullying having conducted a literature review of self-report inventories and bullying typologies (Groenewald, 2004; Aspers, 2009; Nielsen, Notelaers, & Einarsen, 2011; Escartin et al., 2019). Bullying measuring scales in the literature review included: The Work Harassment Scale WHS, Leymann Inventory of Psychological Terror LIPT/LIPT II, Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised NAQ-R, Taxonomy of Workplace Bullying TWB (Björkqvist et al., 1994; Leymann, 1997; Cowie et al., 2002; Salin, 2003; Einarsen, Hoel, & Notelaers, 2009; Escartin et al., 2009). Having analyzed the data, a qualitative questionnaire was compiled (Figure 1).

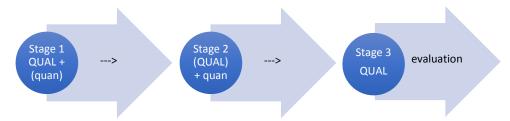


Figure 1. Research Model. Source: Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches. Sage publications. Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2017).

Findings and discussion

There is a statistical significance between bullying and incomprehensible instructions regarding the manner and time of completing tasks (H1). Newly employed staff complained about being either given unreasonable deadlines or that instructions are misunderstandable (Table 1). During the interviews, the respondents frequently accused their superiors of being incompetent as they used words and phrases they considered unprofessional. The unfamiliar professional jargon created an obstacle that might have impeded cognition. As a consequence of inadequate instructions, respondents felt criticized during the realization of their tasks (H2). Frequently, new employees were convinced that their mistakes were the fault of their superiors failing to provide them with proper instructions. The unawareness of the standardization of process and results frequently intensified subjective perception of being bullied through

constant criticism of their work (H3). Negative feedback after having received inadequate instructions and being constantly micro-managed in the process of decision realization intensified their discomfort and further developed into subjective experience of bullying by less experienced staff. Perceived bullying in the process of instrumental communication correlated negatively with longer work experience in the organization (H4). Time spent in the organization enabled to either learn or improve the required skills for more effective completion of tasks and the manner of their realization. Thus, the initial few months might intensify new employees' negativity towards their superiors and result in subjective experience of bullying.

Table 1. *Findings*

Parameter	WE < 1	IC1		WE < 2	IC1	
(H1) Makes allusions, without	Y	0,57***	(n = 37)	Y	0,29**	(n = 74)
expressing						
explicitly when dealing with	N	0,02	(n = 230)	N	0,03	(n = 193)
other employees						
		IC2			IC2	
(H2) Criticizes the work of	Y	0,45**	(n = 37)	Y	0,05	(n = 74)
other employees						
	N	0,07	(n = 230)	N	0,05	(n = 193)
		IC3			IC3	
(H3) Criticizes the work of	Y	0,71***	(n = 37)	Y	0,55***	(n = 74)
other employees						
	N	0,36***	(n = 230)	N	0,36***	(n = 193)
	*p < 0,05	** p <	***p <			
		0,01	0,001			

Parameter – instrumental communication				
(H1) When I receive a task, my superior only provides me with the date of its completion,				
whereas the manner of its implementation is completely up to me				
(H2) When I realize my tasks, my superior checks the manner of their implementation and/or				
suggests possible corrections				
(H3) After completing the task, the superior expresses dissatisfaction if the outcome is				
inconsistent with their expectations and guidelines				
Work experience shorter than 1 year				
Work experience shorter than 2 years				

Conclusion

The first year of employment is of paramount importance in the process of confidence building, as well as job performance (McKenna et al., 2003; Laschinger, 2012; Missen et al., 2014). Lack of proper mentoring and training in the process of instrumental communication between superiors and subordinates might result in subjective experience of bullying. Bullying victims may envisage similar symptoms to post-traumatic stress disorder and even react physically in specific circumstances (Björkqvist et al., 1994). Suppressed anger might be vented

online and create a negative company image of the organization (Slonje & Smith, 2008; Bartlett & Bartlett, 2011; Szmidt, 2012; Muhonen et al., 2017; Forssell, 2019). Experts in this field stress that lack of physical contact dehumanizes the victim through online disinhibition effects (Suler, 2004; Dooley et al., 2009; Kowalski et al., 2012). Perceived bullying might also incur financial losses due to legal disputes (Baruch, 2005; Orozco, 2016; Milosevic, 2016; Hoel et al., 2020). Failure to either acknowledge that phenomenon of bullying might be subjectively experienced by employees or simply being unaware of the possibility, does not relieve organizations from potential negative consequences related to its occurrence. Moreover, new employees' initial experience could provide employers with invaluable information about the workplace and prevent potentially harmful consequences to organizations, superiors and subordinates.

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