

The perception of post-graduate students regarding workplace bullying

Christoff Botha, Mariëtta Basson, Jan du Plessis

Abstract

The eventual aim of this research is to study bullying in Africa, by focussing on the experience of Post Graduate Business Administration students and their colleagues at their places of work.

Very little research has been done in Africa regarding bullying in the world of work or bullying in the broader society. For the authors of this paper, workplace bullying, at its core, can always be traced back to the abuse or misuse of power. In the introductory part of this study the authors aim at measuring the exact frequency of this phenomenon in the workplace.

The revised Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised (NAQ-R), an instrument designed to measure exposure to bullying in the workplace, will be used with the permission of the Bergen Study Group in Norway.

At this stage, based on the literature, we view bullying in the workplace as a process that is influenced by organisational, individual and contextual factors that has consequences for the perpetrator, victim and organisation. Regarding bullying in Africa, we want to determine prevalence, organisational factors, consequences, perceptions, leadership, cultural aspects, management perspective, antecedents, and perpetrator profile.

Without theoretical justification, the contribution of any study to improving our understanding of the phenomena that develop in work and organisational settings is seriously reduced. This paper therefore was constructed with a sound theoretical and literature background by the authors.

Post Graduate students of the North West University, specifically Masters in Business Administration students (MBA) will be asked to complete a questionnaire on workplace bullying. Business environments and workplace backgrounds differ widely and a lot of environments were included. These differ from manufacturing to the service industry.

Workplace bullying is perceived as undesirable in organisations and has negative results for harmony in working relations and is caused by continuously negative acts. The aim of this study is to establish numbers of incidences, frequency of incidents and perception of enrolled MBA students on the occurrence of workplace bullying in their working environment. The population for this study consists of all post graduate students enrolled for the MBA programme with the Potchefstroom Business School in South Africa (N=276).

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Key Words: Workplace bullying, post graduate students, incidence, prevalence, perceptions, latent class models, conditional probability

1. Motivation

Gonzalez-Roma states that, “without theoretical justification, the contribution of any study to improving our understanding of the phenomena that develop in work and organisational settings is seriously reduced.”¹ However, the authors used latent class models to enhance and expand understanding of the theory and application of workplace bullying. This paper therefore was constructed with a sound theoretical and literature background by the authors

Very little research has been done in Africa regarding bullying in the world of work. Negative acts in the workplace, dysfunctional supervision or leadership and the misuse of power also received little attention.

Bullying is being recognised as a serious issue in the workplace context.² Although the negative repercussions of bullying in the workplace for the organisation and individual has been described and validated, Africa did not pay attention.

The potential negative effects for South Africa if bullying is not being recognised and dealt with, includes inter alia the malfunctioning of leadership models, the definition of management success and the increase in counterproductive workplace behaviours.³

2. Introduction

Bullying in the workplace is a process that is influenced by organisational, individual and contextual factors that has consequences for the perpetrator, victim and organisation.

Workplace bullying, at its core, can always be traced back to the abuse or misuse of power.⁴ The bullying behaviours or negative acts, include the assigning of meaningless tasks or the repeated reminding of mistakes, the deliberate withholding of work-related information or the prevention of access to training, disrupting the victim or the setting of impossible deadlines, teasing and insulting of the victim and the public humiliation or accusation of lack of effort on the side of the victim. These bullying behaviours can respectively be sorted into five thematic categories:

1. Destabilisation
2. Isolation
3. Overwork
4. Threat to personal standing
5. Threat to professional status⁵

Baillien et al formulated a model consisting of three processes that triggers bullying: (1) active or passive inefficient coping with frustrations, (2) unsolved interpersonal conflicts and (3) team and organisational characteristics conducive to bullying.⁶ At the origin of these processes may be individual and work related antecedents that relate to the employee's coping style.⁷ Counterproductive workplace behaviours can be predicted by higher levels of workplace bullying and there is a relationship between prolonged conflict and bullying.⁸

Workplace bullying, caused by continuously negative acts is perceived as undesirable in organisations and has negative results for harmony in working relations.⁹ Workplace bullying can trigger serious, persistent underlying disorders and has severe mental health repercussions.¹⁰

The psychosomatic model of workplace bullying are supported by the findings of Djurkovic, McCormack and Casimir. They found that bullying and neuroticism act independently on negative affect.¹¹ Therefore the disposition of the victim does not influence his/her emotional reaction on bullying. According to the psychosomatic model of bullying, bullying leads to negative affect which in turn leads to physical symptoms. This highlights the need for anti-bullying policies in organisations.¹²

However, Ferris et al explored bullying behaviour as a behaviour that is strategically employed to influence situations and perceptions. They propose short term productivity increases from underperforming employees. The audiences of these bullying behaviours also may change their behaviour and increase their performance in order to avoid being a target.¹³

The person being bullied act as an active interpreter of ambiguous stimuli, the person chooses how he/she is going to react.¹⁴ Because some bullying starts out subtly, the victim does not always realise what is happening.¹⁵ Simon describes the tactics of manipulators: Their aggression is not obvious and victims found themselves unconsciously intimidated, they can't point to objective evidence; frequently their tactics are powerful deception techniques which keep the victim unconsciously on the defensive; clever manipulators exploit personal weaknesses and insecurities.¹⁶

3. Problem statement

Workplace bullying is being considered as extremely disruptive with negative consequences. Even though it influences work life in a negative way, not much published research is available for the South African work place. It appears as if there is a lack of understanding and support in the working environment.

The absence of in depth research and initiative to investigate this phenomenon, give rise to great concern.

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4. Objectives

The objective of this research is to study bullying in South Africa, by focussing on the experience of post graduate business administration students and their colleagues at their places of work.

In this study the authors aimed at measuring the frequency of this phenomenon in the workplace.

5. Research methodology

A. NAQ-R

Post Graduate students of the North West University, specifically Masters in Business Administration students (MBA) were asked to complete the Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised (NAQ-R) of Einarsen on workplace bullying as well as a demographic questionnaire. The use of this measure of workplace bullying allows for the future comparison of our survey results with other cultures and organisational settings.

The last question in this questionnaire gives a definition of bullying and the respondent indicates whether he/she is being bullied. The rest of the questionnaire encompasses statements regarding negative acts that occurs in the workplace.

The responses to the NAQ-R can inter alia be evaluated using the operational classification method (OCM). If a person is being subjected to at least one negative event on a weekly or daily basis over a period of six months, the person is being classified as a victim.¹⁷ In this way a person's perceived experience of bullying can be compared to his/her experience of being subjected to negative acts.

B. Terminology and model definition

The exposure of bullying in the workplace is being measured with highly skewed variables, using categorical response variables. A statistical analysis that takes the skewness of categorical variables into account is Latent Class (LC) models and was therefore applied in this study. LC models cluster respondents into mutually exclusive classes with respect to a latent (unobservable) trait, in this case, bullying.

Suppose we observe J categorical variables (questions) each with K possible outcomes, for individuals $i=1, \dots$. For this study there are $K=4$ possible outcomes for each "manifest" variable used in the questionnaire. Denote Y_{ijk} the observed values of the J variables such that

$$Y_{ijk} =$$

if respondent i gives the k th response to the j th variable. The LC model approximates the observed joint distribution of the manifest variables as the weighted sum of a finite number of cross-classification tables (latent classes),

R The number of latent classes, R in a given data set are not automatically determine. It does offer a variety of parsimony and goodness of fit statistics that may be use in order to make a theoretically and empirically sound assessment.¹⁸ Let π_{jrk} denote the class-conditional probability that an observation in class $r \in 1, \dots, R$ produces the k th outcome on the j th variable. Within each class, for each manifest variable,

$$\sum_{k=1}^K \pi_{jrk} = 1 \quad .$$

Furthermore denote p_r as the weights in the weighted sum of the classes with

$$\sum_r p_r = 1 \quad ^{19}$$

The estimates for the above conditional probabilities are weights for the selected number of classes and is estimated by maximizing the log-likelihood function given by

$$\log L(p) = \sum_{i=1}^{nR} \sum_{j=1}^J \prod_{k=1}^K (\pi_{jrk}^{Y_{ijk}})$$

The statistical software package, poLCA were used in this study in order to calculate the class-conditional probabilities.²⁰ As indicated above, LC models differ from Factor Analysis in the sense that the number of classes must be specified before estimation. Since the number of parameters increase rapidly with the increase in the number of variables and classes, only a two class and three class LC model were considered in this study due to sample size.

6. Results and discussion

A. Demographic

Of the population of 257, 146 questionnaires were completed, for the rest were absent on the day, indicating a response rate of 56.8%. The average age of the participants was 36.3 ± 6.8 years. Of the 146 participants, 97.9% were either full time employed or self employed and 71.2% were male. The study population consisted predominantly of managers: 62.3% were middle managers and 21.2% were senior managers.

B. OCM

The distribution of the answers to the NAQ-R question 1 to 21 versus the self report measure on bullying (question 23) are given in Table 1.

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Table 1 Reported experience of negative acts in the work place compared to reported experience of being bullied in the work place.

Answer categories	Experience of negative acts	Self reported bullied
Never	55.4%	78.6%
Now and then	29.5%	17.9%
Once a month	8.1%	2.1%
Once a week or more	7.0%	1.4%

In Table 1, the respondents' experiences of negative acts in the workplace are compared to their experience of being bullied. Although 78.6% of the respondents claimed that they were 'never' bullied, only 55.4% reported that they 'never' experienced negative acts in the work place. Similarly 17.9% of the respondents reported that they were only 'now and then' bullied, whilst 29.5% reported that they experienced negative acts 'now and then'. Only 2.1% of the respondents reported that they were bullied 'once a month' compared to 8.1% that experienced negative acts 'once a month'. Only 1.4% of the respondents reported that they were being bullied 'once a week or more' in contrast to the 7% that reported that they experience negative acts 'once a week or more'.

C. LC models

The results for the two class LC model on the data of the NAQ-R are given in Table 2. The values in brackets in the above mentioned table are the standard errors. The question regarding physical violence was not considered during the latent class modelling.

For each group, Table 2 summarizes the mean conditional probabilities (CP) obtained from the analysis. These mean conditional probabilities reflect the average probabilities that respondents in a given class will choose one of the four categories.

Respondents from the first class were characterised by a mean CP of 74% to have 'never' been subjected to any of the negative acts in the NAQ-R. They were therefore labelled as 'not bullied' and this class included 58% of the study participants.

The respondents of the second class were characterised by a high mean CP of 43.46% in the 'now and then' category and were therefore labelled as the 'sometimes bullied' class. Forty two percent of the respondents belonged into this class.

Table 2 Mean conditional probabilities for four answer categories as a function of latent class type for the two class LC model.

	Clusters	
	Not bullied	Sometimes bullied
Percentage of participants in cluster	58.00	42.00
Answer categories		
Never	.7444(0.18)	.2700(0.13)
Now and then	.2150(0.15)	.4346(0.10)
Once a month	.2800(0.04)	.1545(0.70)
Once a week or more	.1200(0.03)	.1428(0.90)

Figure 1 represents the conditional probability for the first 21 questions. These conditional probabilities reflect the probability that respondents in a given class would have chosen one of the four categories for each one of the questions.

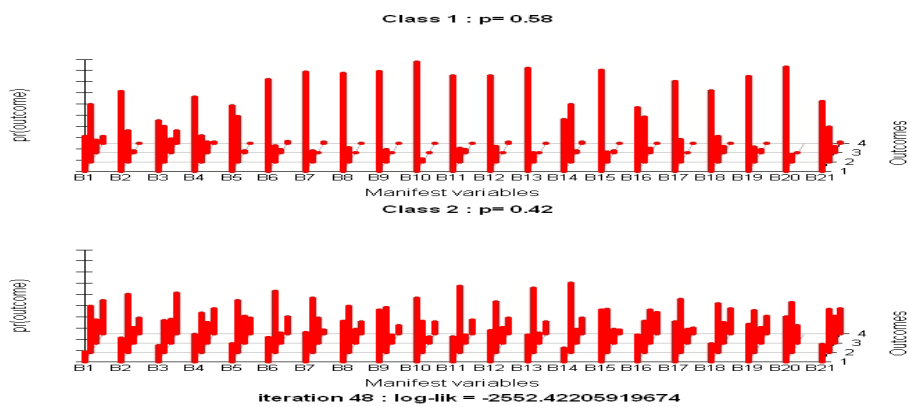


Figure 1 Conditional probabilities for the twenty one variables for the two class LC model

The probability that a respondent in class 1 of the two class LC model would answer ‘never’ to a question regarding the experience of negative acts in the workplace varied between 56% and 97% except for

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statements regarding the withholding of information, doing work below competence level and having opinions and views ignored. (See figure 1)

It is clear from figure 1 that the respondents that belong to class 2 of the two class LC model, experience negative acts predominantly 'now and then' but that some do experience negative acts 'once a week or more'.(See figure 1)

The results for the three class LC model on the data of the NAQ are given in Table 3.

Table 3 Mean conditional probabilities for four answer categories as a function of latent class type for the three class LC model.

	Clusters		
	Not bullied	Sometimes experience negative acts	Being bullied
Percentage of participants in class	50.7	42.8	6.5
Answer categories			
Never	0.7752(0.18)	0.3380(0.16)	0.1163(0.18)
Now and then	0.1896(0.15)	0.4794(0.12)	0.0952(0.11)
Once a month	0.0222(0.04)	0.1204(0.08)	0.2700(0.15)
Once a week or more	0.0125(0.03)	0.0653(0.07)	0.5445(0.18)

Respondents from the first class were characterised by a mean CP of 77.5% to have 'never' been subjected to any of the negative acts in the NAQ-R. They were therefore labelled as 'not bullied' and this class included 50.7% of the study participants.

The respondents of the second cluster were characterised by a high mean CP of 47.9% in the 'now and then' category and were therefore labelled as the 'sometimes experience negative acts' cluster. Forty three percent of the respondents belonged into this class.

Only 6.5% of the respondents belonged to the third class. The third class's respondents were characterised by a mean CP of 54.5% to have been subjected to one or more negative acts once a week or more and were therefore labelled 'being bullied'.

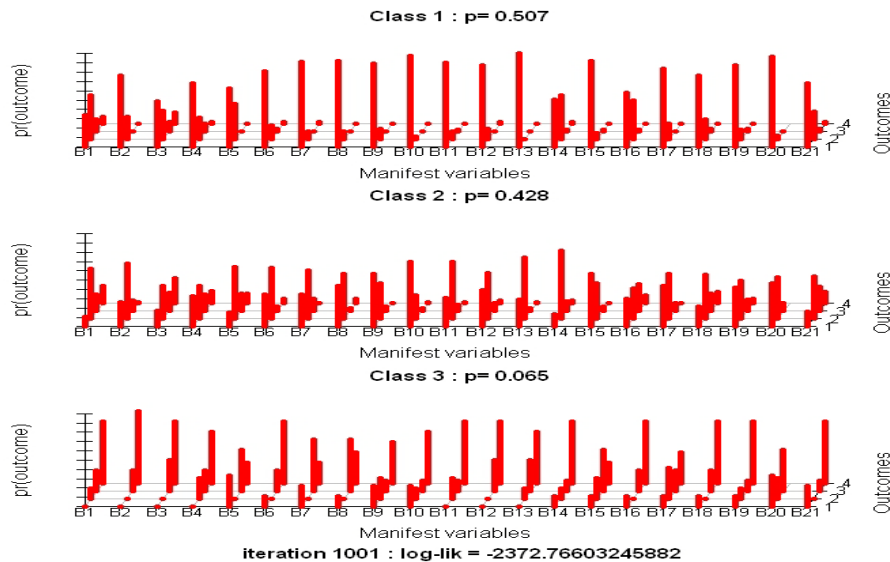


Figure 2 Conditional probabilities for the twenty one variables for the three class LC model.

Although the respondents belonging to class one of the three class LC model clearly reported that they ‘never’ experience negative acts, they did experience that sometimes information was withheld that affected their performance. It is clear that these respondents were not being bullied. (See figure 2).

The respondents belonging to class 3 of the three class LC model had in most instances a probability higher than 67% to answer affirmative if asked whether they experienced the negative act weekly or more. The negative acts regarding gossip and rumours, offensive remarks, practical jokes, teasing and sarcasm, and being the subject of practical jokes, were only experienced on a monthly basis. The probability that a member of this group was the subject of allegations was smaller than 33%. (See figure 2)

Respondents belonging to class two of the three class LC model experienced negative acts, either ‘now and then’ or ‘never’.

7. Discussion and conclusion

Subjectively only 1,4% of the victims experienced being bullied whilst objectively 7% of the respondents are being classified as being bullied using OCM. This corresponds to other studies where the frequency of bullying varies between 8% and 15% compared to 2% to 10% when subjective methods are being used.²¹ In the three class LC model, 7,5% of

the respondents clustered in a class that are characterised by responses that indicate a 54% probability to be bullied on a weekly or more basis. In other words, the three class LC model confirmed the OCM statistical calculation.

In the two class and the three class LC models, the responses indicated a 74% and 78% probability respectively, to choose 'never' as an option. The classes consisted of 58% and 50.7% respectively of the respondents.

In future, the use of larger data sets will ensure that a researcher is not being restricted in terms of the number of classes that can be investigated. As Bartholomew and Knott confirms when they write that "It is known that models of this kind may have multiple maxima and the risk of this appears to increase as K , the number of classes, increases and to decrease with increasing sample size."²²

Notes

¹ V González-Romá, 'Editorial: Changes in EJWOP and plans for the future'. *European Journal of Work and Organisational Psychology*, Vol. 18, no. 1, March, 2009, p 3

² H Cowie, P Naylor, I Rivers, P K Smith, B Pereira, 'Measuring workplace bullying'. *Agression and Violent Behavior*, Vol. 7, 2002, p. 34.

³ O B Ayoko, V J Callan & C E J Hartel, 'Workplace Conflict, Bullying, and Counterproductive Behaviours', *International Journal of Organisational Analysis*, vol. 11, no. 4, 2003, pp. 283-301.

³ S Einarsen, M S Aasland, and A Skogstad. 'Destructive Leadership Behaviour: A Definition and Conceptual Model'. *The Leadership Quarterly*, vol. 18, 2007, pp. 207-216.

³ G R Ferris, R Zinko, R L. Brouer, et al. 'Strategic Bullying as a Supplementary, Balanced Perspective on Destructive Leadership'. *The Leadership Quarterly*, vol. 18, 2007, pp. 195-206.

³ K D L Bryson, 'Managerial Success and Derailment: The Relationship between Emotional Intelligence and Leadership'. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, vol. 66, 2005, pp. 614.

⁴ S Einarsen, 'Harassment and bullying at work: A review of the Scandinavian approach'. *Agression and Violent Behaviour*, Vol. 5, no. 4, 2000, pp. 379-386.

⁵ C Rayner, and H Hoel. 'A Summary Review of Literature Relating to Workplace Bullying'. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, vol. 7, 1997, p. 183.

⁶ E Baillien, I Neyens, H De Witte, N de Cuyper. 'A Qualitative Study on the Development of Workplace Bullying: Towards a Three Way

Model', *Journal of Community and Applied Psychology*, vol. 19, 2009, pp. 7-9.

⁷ ibid

⁸ Ayoko et. al., p. 279.

⁹ G Notelaers, S Einarsen, H de Witte and J K Vermunt, 'Measuring exposure to bullying at work: The validity and advantages of the latent class cluster approach'. *Work & Stress*, vol. 20, no. 4, October-December 2006, p. 290.

¹⁰ G Brousse, L Fontana, L Ouchchane, et al., 'Psychopathological Features of a Patient Population of Targets of Workplace Bullying'. *Occupational Medicine*, vol. 58, no. 2, March, 2008, p. 122.

¹¹ N Djurkovic, D McCormack, and G Casimir. 'Neuroticism and the Psychosomatic Model of Workplace Bullying'. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2006.

¹² ibid

¹³ Ferris, 2007, pp.107 and 202.

¹⁴ A P D Liefoghe and R Olafsson, "'Scientists" and "Amateurs": Mapping the Bullying Domain'. *International Journal of Man Power*, vol. 20, no. 1/2, 1999, p. 40.

¹⁵ H Frankel, 'What's the Crime Mr. Wolf?', *Times Educational Supplement*, no. 4728, 2007, pp. 20-23.

¹⁶ G K Simon, *'In Sheep's Clothing'*, A J Christopher & Co., United States of America, 1996, p8-10.

¹⁷ Notelaers et.al., p. 291.

¹⁸ D J Bartholomew and M. Knott., *'Latent Variable Models and Factor Analysis'*. Oxford University Press Inc, New York, 1999.

¹⁹ D A Linzer and J. B. Lewis, 'PoLCA: An R Package for Polytomous Variable Latent Class Analysis'. *Journal of Statistical Software*, In Press.

²⁰ Linzer, Drew A., and Jeffrey Lewis. 'PoLCA: Polytomous Variable Latent Class Analysis.', Published November 3, 2007, viewed on September 30, 2009

< [http://userwww.service.emory.edu/~dlinzer/poLCA ...](http://userwww.service.emory.edu/~dlinzer/poLCA...)>

²¹ D Zapf, S Einarsen, H Hoel, and M Vartia, 'Empirical findings on bullying in the work place'. *Bullying and emotional abuse in the work place. International perspectives in research and practice*, Taylor & Francis, London, 2003, as cited in: Notelaers, et.al., p. 291

²² Bartholomew and Knott, p. 139.

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Biographical notes

- Christoff Botha is an Industrial Sociologist and full time lecturer at the Potchefstroom Business School of the North West University in South Africa. His passion for labour relations and the workplace stretches over a period of more than 20 years.
- Mariëtta Basson is a registered Industrial Psychologist with the Health Professionals Council of South Africa and a full time lecturer at the North West University in South Africa. People and their development fascinate her and are prominent in her research output.
- Jan du Plessis is a statistician and full time lecturer at the North West University in South Africa. He describes himself as a Bayesian. This influences the way in which Jan practices his love for statistics and statistical analysis.