

## Prevalence of Workplace Bully in Selected Public Service Agency in Malaysia: Do Destructive Leadership Behaviour Matters?

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to describe the prevalence of workplace bully and to determine the influence of destructive leadership behaviour on workplace bullying in a selected public service agency in Malaysia. A total of 112 public service employees' participated in this study. Data were collected from the respondents using self-administered questionnaire. The findings revealed a high prevalence of workplace bullying (83.2%) in the selected public service agency. The result of the two-step cluster analysis suggested three clusters. The first comprised 43.7% employees which can be categorized as experiencing occasional bullying ( $M=60.96$ ;  $SD=9.13$ ), the second cluster comprised 21.8% employees categorized as experiencing regular bullying ( $M=71.5$ ;  $SD=19.15$ ), and the final cluster comprised 34.5% employees categorized as experiencing severe bullying ( $M=81.27$ ;  $SD=4.23$ ). The most frequent negative acts experienced were being given task with unreasonable or impossible targets or deadlines, being ordered to work below their level of competence and intimidating behaviour. Meanwhile, the least frequent negative acts experienced were being humiliated or ridiculed at work, being shouted at or being the target of spontaneous anger, and practical jokes carried out by people that the employees do not get on with. The findings also showed destructive leadership behaviour has a strong influence on workplace bullying. This study supports the contention that a destructive form of leadership provides fertile ground for workplace bullying.

Keywords: Workplace bullying, destructive leadership, mobbing, workplace harassment

### INTRODUCTION

Workplace bullying is a widespread problem in organizations (Nielsen, Matthiesen, & Einarsen, 2010; Strandmark & Hallberg, 2007). It is more common than sexual harassment, workplace violence or racial discrimination (Einarsen, 1999; Namie, 2007). Exposure to workplace bullying has severe consequences on victims' mental health and physical health (Salin, 2003; Strandmark & Hallberg, 2007). Studies have reported that victims of workplace bullying tend to have higher absenteeism or turnover, longer sick leave, have reduced job satisfaction, organizational commitment and work motivation (Bentley et al., 2012; Vingård et al., 2005). Bullying may also affect employees' family life and career (Namie, 2007).

Studies on bullying phenomena were conducted in many countries (Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Ireland, England, Korea, Japan, Germany, Italy, Australia, New Zealand, Mexico, United States and other countries). These studies suggest the pervasiveness of workplace bullying across all sectors including the public sector (Harvey, Treadway, & Heames, 2006; Harvey, Treadway, Heames, & Duke, 2008). In the U.K, the public sector union (UNISON) reported workplace bully is increasing (UNISON, 2011). In Australia, the New South Wales Public Service Commission reported almost half of the public sector employees have witnessed bullying at work, and almost one-third of them said they had personally experienced workplace bullying in the last 12 month (*People Matter Employee Survey*, 2012). Although workplace bullying is recognized as serious problem in many countries, this problem has received little attention in Malaysia. As Malaysia scores very high on the

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Power Distance Index compared to other countries (The Iclif Leadership and Governance Center, 2014; The Star, 2014), workplace bully may be more tolerated (Loh, Restubog, & Zagenczyk, 2010). Consequently, employee may misinterpret bullying behaviours as legitimate acts and will continue to endure such behaviour (Samnani, 2012).

Furthermore, in order to accelerate the efforts to improve public service delivery in Malaysia, the Government has shifted towards a more performance driven or outcome-based efforts and strategic plans. For instance, several Government Transformation Programs (GTP) were undertaken where measurable key performance targets were set and monitored for each agency. A Star Rating System was also implemented to rate public service agencies' performance. Although such practices may elicit desirable performance outcomes, it may also lead to undesirable consequences such as bullying behaviour because such behaviour may be treated as a way to get things done (Samnani & Singh, 2013). Moreover, studies have shown increasing trend of workplace bullying when organizational changes occur (Skogstad, Matthiesen, & Einarsen, 2007). The shift towards a more performance-driven efforts is a form of organizational change taking place in the public service which may elicit incidence of workplace bullying. Hence, a high power distance culture supplemented with continuous performance monitoring system in the civil service may lead to higher incidence of workplace bullying. Since workplace bullying is widespread across sectors, more studies are needed to examine the prevalence of workplace bullying in the Malaysian public sector to determine the severity of the problem and to take appropriate measures (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2001).

Incidence of workplace bullying results from interactions among individual, organizational and contextual factors (Ariza-Montes, Muniz, Montero-Simó, & Araque-Padilla, 2013). Among these factors, leadership is identified as an important predictor of workplace bullying (Ertureten, Cemalcilar, & Aycan, 2012; Hoel, Glasø, Hetland, Cooper, & Einarsen, 2010). Most studies on leadership have focused on positive aspects of leadership (Einarsen, Aasland, & Skogstad, 2007; Schilling, 2009; Schyns & Schilling, 2013). This positive image might partly reflect a romantic, larger-than-life conception of leadership that characterizes many practitioners and academics (Schilling, 2009). However, in reality, leaders are said to have the capacity and motivation to be destructive (Einarsen et al., 2007). Studies showed most workplace bullying occurred from position of power where leaders, managers and supervisors are the key instigators (Thoroughgood, Tate, Sawyer, & Jacobs, 2012). There is a call for more research conducted to examine the darker side of leadership behaviour and its impact on employees and organizations (Einarsen et al., 2007). Thus, it is timely to elicit systematic knowledge on the seriousness of workplace bullying in the local context and to explain the extent to which workplace bullying is influenced by the darker side of leadership behaviours. This study aims: 1) to examine the prevalence of workplace bullying in a selected public service agency, and 2) to determine the influence of destructive leadership behaviour on workplace bullying. By identifying leaders' behaviours that employee regard as detrimental, organizations can begin to develop and implement leadership interventions aimed at reducing the potential for the emergence of toxicity in existing leaders, or preventing bullying in the organization.

### *Workplace Bullying*

Workplace bullying or mobbing is a form of systematic mistreatment of subordinate, colleague, or superior, which, if continued and long-lasting, may cause severe social, psychological, and psychosomatic problems in the target (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011). Leymann defined mobbing as "hostile and unethical communication directed in a systematic way by one or more persons, mainly towards one targeted individual" (Leymann, 1990, p. 120). Einarsen and colleagues (Einarsen et al., 2011; Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996; Einarsen, 1999) defined workplace bullying as all those repeated actions and practices directed to one or more workers, which are unwanted by the victim, which may be done deliberately or unconsciously, but clearly cause humiliation, offence and distress, and may interfere with job performance or causing unpleasant working environment. These actions have to occur repeatedly and regularly (for example, weekly) over a certain period of time (for example, about six months) (Einarsen, Hoel, & Notelaers, 2009). The act ranges from subtle acts such as a dirty look or snide comment to overt aggressive acts such as having an item being thrown or physical threat (Saunders, Huynh, & Goodman-Delahunty, 2007). Subtle bullying is considered more common (Samnani & Singh, 2012). Rayner & Hoel, (1997) have grouped workplace bullying behaviours into five types:

1. threat to professional status (e.g., belittling opinion, public professional humiliation, and accusation regarding lack of effort);
2. threat to personal standing (e.g., name-calling, insults, and intimidation);
3. isolation (e.g., preventing access to opportunities, physical or social isolation, and withholding information);
4. overwork (e.g., undue pressure, impossible deadlines, and unnecessary disruptions)

5. destabilization (e.g., failure to give credit when due, meaningless tasks, and removal of responsibility).

It is important to distinguish between ordinary employee conflict and workplace bullying. A conflict does not constitute bullying if the incident is an isolated event or if two parties of approximately equal strength are in conflict (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2001). Five essential criteria must present to define bullying, namely: (1) victims experience negative behavior; (2) behaviors are experienced persistently; (3) victims experience psychological or physical harm; (4) victims perceive they have less power than the bully and, thus have difficulty defending themselves; and (5) victims label themselves bullied (Rayner & Keashly, 2005). Workplace bully is also different from abusive supervision because it is not only concerned with downward vertical mistreatment but also mistreatment from subordinate to supervisor, between co-workers and from customers to employee (Samnani & Singh, 2012; Tepper et al., 2007).

#### *Destructive Leadership and Workplace Bullying*

Einarsen, Aasland, & Skogstad, (2007, p. 208) defined destructive leadership as “systematic and repeated behaviour by leaders, supervisors or managers that violates the legitimate interest of the organization by undermining and/or sabotaging the organization’s goals, tasks, resources, and effectiveness or the motivation, wellbeing or job satisfaction of subordinates”. Their definition encompasses behaviours in two domains, that is, behaviours directed toward subordinates and behaviours directed toward the organisation itself. Krasikova, Green, and LeBreton, (2013), building on the definition of Einarsen et al., (2007), defined destructive leadership as volitional behaviour by a leader that can harm or intends to harm a leader’s organization and/or followers by (a) encouraging followers to pursue goals that contravene the legitimate interests of the organization and/or (b) employing a leadership style that involves the use of harmful methods of influence with followers, regardless of justifications for such behaviour.

Past research has shown that destructive forms of leadership and extremely autocratic style of leadership were associated with higher reports of bullying (Hoel et al., 2010; Vartia, 1996). Leadership deficiencies such as destructive behaviours are considered as one of the key contributing factors of workplace bullying (Leymann, 1996). This contention is supported by the Leymann model of workplace bullying. Leymann, (1993) outlined four prominent factors in explaining bullying behaviours at work, and one of these factors are deficiencies in leadership behaviour. Additionally, Johnson's, (2011) ecological model of workplace bullying suggested four interrelated systems that encompass series of events that constitute bullying. One of the interrelated systems is the meso-system which comprised of immediate workgroup, including managers who are considered as a key antecedent of bullying.

Destructive leadership behaviour involves encouraging followers to pursue goals that contravene the legitimate interests of organizations or employing leadership style that uses harmful methods of influence with followers (Krasikova et al., 2013). The harmful methods can be in the form of exerting unreasonable pressure on subordinates to perform, rule breaking to achieve goals or gain an advantage, or rewarding bullies for aggressive behaviour (Ramsay, Troth, & Branch, 2011). From the leader’s perspective, such use of force can be instrumental in nature, motivated by meeting organizational outcomes (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003). All these may bring forth negative social rules that may foster workplace bullying (Ramsay et al., 2011). Destructive leaders may reduce cohesiveness and foster helplessness, frustration, stress and despair among subordinates by curbing their initiative and closely controlling them which may lead to stressful work environment in which bullying can flourish (Ashforth, 1994). Destructive leaders may also cultivate bullying behaviour in others. Leaders who are abusive, aggressive, or punitive represent a source of stress, which may lead to destructive behaviours among co-workers, including bullying, to secure their position in the work unit (Kelloway, Sivanathan, Francis, & Barling, 2005). Hence, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 1: Destructive leadership behaviour is positively related to workplace bullying.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### *Population and Sample*

The target population were 213 public officers serving in a selected public service agency. A total of 140 public officers were selected using proportionate random sampling technique as the study sample. A self-administered questionnaire using drop and collect method was used. Several follow-ups were done to ensure return of the questionnaires. Finally, a total of 119 (85%) questionnaires were returned. Most of the respondents were female (58.8%). The age of most of the respondents (40.3%) ranged from 25 to 29 years old. As for the length of service, 37% have served the government for 1 to 5 years, and 29.4% have served for 6 to 10 years.

## Instrument

Workplace bullying was measured using Negative Acts Questionnaire (NAQ) developed by Einarsen and Raknes, (1997). This questionnaire adopts the behavioural experience method in measuring workplace bullying (Nielsen, Notelaers, & Einarsen, 2011). The NAQ has 29 items and measures how often during the previous 6-month period respondents were subjected to various negative acts. It measures two forms of workplace bullying; 1) person-related bullying (16 items), and 2) work-related bullying (13 items). Response categories are *never*, *now or then*, *about weekly*, and *about daily* ranging from 1 to 5 respectively. The scales have satisfactory reliability and construct validity (Einarsen et al., 2009; Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996). The NAQ has also been used to measure workplace bullying in Malaysia (Yahaya et al., 2012). The scale showed high internal consistency in this study ( $\alpha= 0.90$ ). *Destructive leadership behaviour* was measured using instrument developed by (Einarsen, S.; Skogstad, A.; Aasland, M.S.;Løseth, 2002) which comprised of 22 items measured on a four-point scale ranging from 1 (never) to 4 (very often). The scale also showed high internal consistency ( $\alpha= 0.87$ ).

## Data Analysis

Data were analysed using SPSS version 19. We used descriptive statistics to describe the demographic characteristics of the respondents. We analysed the prevalence of workplace bullying using two methods. First we use the operational criterion suggested by Mikkelsen and Einarsen, (2001) which measures the frequency with which respondents have been subjected to various types of negative acts during the previous 6 months. A person is considered a victim of bullying if s/he is exposed to at least two negatively defined acts with a frequency of 4 or 5 (weekly or daily) in the past six months. Secondly, a two-step cluster analysis was used in order to reveal natural clusters of who is or not a victim of workplace bully within the data set. Pearson product moment correlation and hierarchical liner regression (controlling for tenure) using Enter method were used to determine the relationship between destructive leadership behaviour and workplace bully.

## RESULT

### Prevalence of Workplace Bullying

Based on the operational method (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2001), 83.2% of the respondents were victims of bullying as they were exposed to at least two bullying behaviours on weekly or daily basis during the last six months. The result of the two-step cluster analysis suggested three clusters (see Figure 1). The first cluster comprised 43.7% employees who experienced occasional bullying ( $M=60.96$ ;  $SD=9.13$ ), the second cluster comprised 21.8% employees experiencing regular bullying ( $M=71.5$ ;  $SD=19.15$ ), and the final cluster comprised 34.5% employees categorized as experiencing severe bullying ( $M=81.27$ ;  $SD=4.23$ ). The most frequent negative acts experienced were given task with unreasonable or impossible targets or deadlines, being ordered to work below their level of competence and intimidating behaviour such as finger pointing, invasion of personal space, shoving, and blocking/barring the way. Meanwhile, the least frequent negative acts experienced were being humiliated or ridiculed in connection with their work, being shouted or being the target of spontaneous anger, and practical jokes carried out by people employees do not get on with.

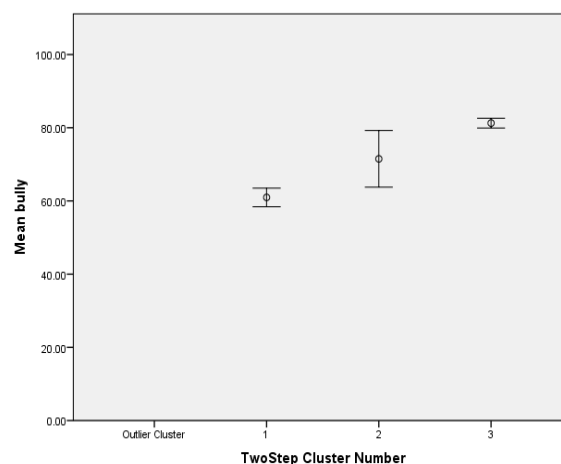


FIGURE 1. Two-step cluster analysis (occasional, regular and severe bullying)

*Relationship between destructive leadership behaviour and workplace bullying.*

Mean, standard deviation and correlation between the variables are shown in Table 1. A significant positive relationship exists between destructive leadership behaviour and workplace bullying ( $r=.86, p<.01$ ) which suggest that when destructive leadership behavior is high, workplace bullying will be high as well.

TABLE 1  
Mean, Standard deviation and Correlations between study variables.

Variables	Mean	Sd	DL	WB
Destructive leadership behaviour (DL)	37.16	6.61	1	.86**
Workplace bullying (WB)	70.27	14.15		1

\*\*  $p < 0.01$  level (1-tailed).

Hierarchical liner regression analysis, presented in Table 2, was used to assess the influence of destructive leadership behaviour on workplace bullying, after controlling for tenure. Tenure was entered at Step 1, explaining 1% variance in workplace bullying. After entry of at Step 2 the total variance explained by the model as a whole was 75%  $F(2, 116) = 169.45, p < .001$ . Destructive leadership behaviour explained an additional 74.99% of the variance in workplace bullying, after controlling for tenure,  $R$  squared change = .74,  $F$  change (1, 116) = 338.43,  $p < .001$ . In the final model (Model 2), only destructive leadership behaviour was significantly related to workplace bullying ( $\beta = .86, p < .001$ ).

TABLE 2  
Hierarchical liner regression result

	Model 1	Model 2
Control variable		
Tenure	-.03 <sup>a</sup>	.01 <sup>a</sup>
Study variable		
Destructive leadership behaviour (DL)		.86 <sup>***</sup>
$F$ for the Regression	.122	169.45 <sup>***</sup>
$R^2$	.001	.75
$F$ Change for the Regression	-	338.44 <sup>***</sup>
$R^2$ Change	-	.74

<sup>a</sup> Standardized  $\beta$  coefficient

\*\*\* Significant at  $p < .001$ .

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study aims to describe the prevalence of workplace bully in a selected public service agency in Malaysia and to determine the influence of destructive leadership behaviour on workplace bullying. The results showed higher prevalence of workplace bullying among public sector employees in Malaysia than those found in different studies using NAQ and the operational method suggested by Mikkelsen and Einarsen (2001). For instance, Giorgi, Arenas, & Leon-Perez, (2011) reported the prevalence of workplace bullying among employees in Italy across sectors was 15.2%. Carter et al., (2013) reported a prevalence rate of 19.9% among healthcare staffs in UK. A study in Australia public sector reported a prevalence rate of 3.8% (Way, Jimmieson, Bordia, & Hepworth, 2013). In Japan, the prevalence rate of workplace bullying among civil servants were 9% (participants were exposed to at least one of the negative acts weekly or more in the past six months (Tsunoo, Kawakami, Inoue, & Abe, 2010). The Japanese study reported only 0.7% were bullied on weekly basis.

Since societal culture has been considered as a proxy to workplace bullying incidence (Galanaki & Papalexandris, 2013; Samnani, 2012), we see power distance as the cultural dimension that could explain the high occurrence of workplace bullying in the selected public service agency (Loh et al., 2010). The Geert Hofstede center has reported that Malaysia scores the highest (100 out of 120) on the Power Distance Index compared to other countries in the world (The Iclif Leadership and Governance Center, 2014; The Star, 2014). Power distance refers to the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations expect and accept that power is distributed unequally (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). In large power distance culture, superiors

and subordinates consider each other as existentially unequal, whereby being a victim of abuse by one's superior is merely considered as bad luck and no redress is expected for such abusive treatment (Hofstede et al., 2010). Hence, in such culture employees may misinterpret bullying acts as legitimate forms of behaviour because of the power ascribed to their supervisor and are less likely to resist such behaviour especially if perpetrated by their superior (Samnani, 2012).

Moreover, the high prevalence of workplace bullying may be due to lack of anti-bullying legislation in this country. Countries such as Australia, UK, Sweden and Canada have passed laws prohibiting workplace bullying. In Malaysia, the right of employees to enjoy a safe and healthy work environment is stipulated in the Malaysian Occupational Safety and Health Act 1994 (OSHA Act). However, the Act does not clearly outline protections against harassment at work such as bullying. In the private sector, the Industrial court has regarded any forms of harassment including bullying as a fundamental breach of employment contract. Victims of workplace bullying may claim for constructive dismissal (refer to the case of *Khoo EE Peng and Galaxy Automation Sdn Bhd*, 2009). However, the position of law on workplace bullying in the public sector remain unclear until to date. Hence, lack of legislative control might lead to the high prevalence of workplace bullying in the public sector in Malaysia.

The findings also revealed that destructive leadership behaviour has strong influence on workplace bullying. The findings support the contention that a destructive form of leadership provides fertile ground for occurrence of workplace bullying. Moreover, in a high power distance culture, destructive leadership may be endured by subordinates because challenges to hierarchical order is frowned upon (Hofstede, 2001), which consequently encourages bullying behaviour at workplace. The implementation of the GTP program to enhance public service delivery may indirectly result to increased workplace bullying as leaders may resort to destructive forms of leadership behaviours to produce results (Samnani & Singh, 2013; Skogstad et al., 2007).

This study has several implications. First, legal protections against workplace bullying are needed for public sector employees. Secondly, besides legal protections, organizations also play an important role in deterring bullying because organization may inadvertently encourage workplace bullying through its work practices and structure (Vega & Comer, 2005). One way to discourage workplace bullying is by formulating anti-bullying policy in the organization. Specific attention should be paid on leaders' conduct towards their subordinates. Without such a policy, it is difficult for staffs to raise issues about their bullying manager or colleague (Hubert, 2003; Richard & Daley, 2003). Besides policy formulation, due diligence process has to be in place for conducting investigations on accusations of workplace bullying (Harvey et al., 2008).

It should be pointed out that the study has several limitations. Firstly, the data on the negative acts experienced by the respondents are drawn from self-reported experiences of the respondents. There is no objective third party verification of these data and no method of establishing the accuracy of the respondents' perceived experiences. Nonetheless, this limitation is regarded as common to most studies of harassment and workplace aggression as this phenomenon is a perceptual phenomenon (Deery, Walsh, & Guest, 2011). Secondly, this phenomenon was examined in a single public service agency. Hence, the findings cannot be generalized to all public service agencies in Malaysia. Future research is needed to examine the prevalence of workplace bullying and to further examine the linkages between destructive leadership behavior and workplace bullying in other public service agencies in this country.

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