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Can ethical leadership inhibit workplace bullying across East and West: Exploring cross-cultural interactional justice as a mediating mechanism

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ABSTRACT

While workplace bullying is recognised as a serious issue for management concern around the world, the literature on approaches to prevent and manage it in international settings is sparse. This paper advances knowledge on managing workplace bullying by reporting an investigation of how and why ethical leadership may be an effective management style to address this issue across cultures. It draws on Social Learning and Social Exchange Theories to conceptualise interactional justice as a possible mediating mechanism by which workplace bullying can be reduced in the presence of ethical leadership.

The researcher surveyed 636 employees working in an equivalent job context in Australia ($N = 306$) and Pakistan ($N = 330$) to determine the cross-cultural effectiveness of ethical leadership-based framing. Through the examination of direct and indirect effects (via interactional justice) of ethical leadership on workplace bullying, the findings indicated that employee exposure to such behaviour is significantly reduced because ethical leaders foster justice at work. This study has implications for improving international management practice in regard to workplace bullying.

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1. Introduction

Workplace bullying commonly refers to a situation in which one or more employees of weaker power are regularly and repeatedly exposed to unethical and unreasonable behaviours at work which they find difficult to escape or defend themselves against (Branch, Ramsay, & Barker, 2013; Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011; Harvey, Treadway, Heames, & Duke, 2009). According to reliable international estimates, up to 18% of the global workforce is exposed to bullying at work (see Nielsen, Matthiesen, & Einarsen, 2010 for a review). Research has also shown detrimental implications of workplace bullying on those exposed to it, in the form of elevated stress levels and increased sickness absenteeism, leading to a decline in organisational productivity and, ultimately, economic output (Bonde et al., 2016; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012; Samnani & Singh, 2012). The prevalent nature and serious implications of workplace bullying warrant research that advances understanding of the management of such behaviour (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2010; Nielsen, 2014; Nielsen et al., 2010). A recent study

observed: “Such persistence and harm suggests a challenge for organisational leadership to tackle the issue proactively and initiate a cultural change driven by moral norms and enforcement of ethical standards” (Ahmad & Sheehan, 2017, p. 21).

Knowledge on the prevention and management of workplace bullying is recognised as a ‘black box’ in the literature (Einarsen, Skogstad, Rørvik, Lande, & Nielsen, 2016, Nielsen, 2014); however, specifically in regard to leadership, ethical leadership style has emerged as a critical inhibiting factor (Stouten et al., 2010; Yamada, 2008). Ethical leadership is defined as “the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making” (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005, p. 120). This leadership style is particularly associated with the regulation of moral norms and enforcement of ethical standards at work (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Mayer, Aquino, Greenbaum, & Kuenzi, 2012). Furthermore, Einarsen et al. (2016, p. 8) have emphasised that “it is of the utmost importance for both exposed individuals and organisations that we seek knowledge on preventive measures against bullying and how the effectiveness of these measures may, or may not, vary between national cultures”. The purpose of this paper is

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therefore to advance the understanding of why and how workplace bullying can be effectively addressed across cultures through ethical leadership.

While considerable progress has been made in understanding the role of leadership in workplace bullying, research has maintained a primary focus on those leadership styles that trigger and escalate this behaviour (Einarsen, Skogstad, & Glasø, 2013, pp. 129–154; Nielsen, 2013). This has been restated by Warszewska-Makuch, Bedyńska, and Żoźniarczyk-Zreda (2015, p. 130): “there is little research into the positive role of leadership in reducing pathological phenomena such as workplace bullying in organisations.” Moreover, extant research has been predominantly conducted in Western countries (Francioli et al., 2015; Nielsen, 2013), where cultures drastically differ from those in Eastern countries; a notable example of these differences is the higher individualistic values prevailing in the West (Hofstede, 2001; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004). Viewing such cultural differences in the light of contemporary trends towards internationally connected workplaces, the significance of research that examines the effectiveness of leadership style(s) in managing employee behaviour across Eastern and Western contexts becomes apparent (see House et al., 2004). Workplace bullying is internationally recognised as representing unacceptable conduct, because it violates moral norms of respect and dignity at work (Bolton, 2007; Harvey et al., 2009; Samnani & Singh, 2012). Yet it is prevalent across cultures around the world (Nielsen et al., 2010; Power et al., 2013). This is because, beyond socio-cultural contexts, a negative work environment is identified as a major cause of workplace bullying (Einarsen, 1999; Hauge, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2007; Leymann, 1996; Salin, 2008).

This notion was advanced through research, widely acknowledged as ‘the work environment hypothesis’ (Francioli et al., 2015; Leymann, 1996; Salin, 2003), which showed workplace bullying is a complex process, enabled by a range of contextual and work factors, such as organisational cultures, climate, structures and leadership styles. Furthermore, there is ample evidence to support the destructive role played by leaders in creating a negative environment, and hence providing a breeding ground for the occurrence of bullying (Einarsen et al., 2013, pp. 129–154; Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2010; Salin & Hoel, 2011; Skogstad, Torsheim, Einarsen, & Hauge, 2011). Unjust treatment at work is common in such an environment (Parzefall & Salin, 2010). Given this backdrop, it is surprising to note a lack of research that advances how injustice and bullying at work can be proactively addressed across East and West through positive leading styles. This is an important research gap, as research conducted in different cultures not only offers greater generalisation of theoretical framing, but also has implications for improved international management practice (Aquino & Thau, 2009). Accordingly, this paper conceptualises an ethical leadership-based framing for addressing workplace bullying in international settings and tests it in the Western context of Australia and the Eastern context of Pakistan, which have widely known cultural differences (see also Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). In so doing, this paper makes several contributions to the literature.

First, in response to the recognition that workplace bullying literature is largely ‘atheoretical’ (Branch et al., 2013), this paper expands the literature by drawing on Social Learning Theory (SLT; Bandura, 1977) and Social Exchange Theory (SET; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) to advance understanding of a process for addressing this issue through ethical leadership. Past research has demonstrated the significance of leadership in workplace bullying situations, but it largely examined those leadership styles which escalate such behaviour (see e.g., Einarsen et al., 2013, pp. 129–154; Nielsen, 2013; Salin & Hoel, 2011). By contrast, this paper addresses

the recommendations of Einarsen et al. (2016) and Warszewska-Makuch et al. (2015) in examining the effectiveness of a preventive approach for workplace bullying in different cultures by investigating a positive leadership style. Second, researchers have acknowledged a substantial limitation in understanding the mechanisms through which leadership impacts bullying at work (see Nielsen, 2014; Stouten et al., 2010). To address that limitation, this paper advances understanding of a justice-based mechanism associated with the workings of ethical leadership which may help in the prevention of workplace bullying. Third, since both ethical leadership and workplace bullying have been predominantly studied in Western countries (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Nielsen et al., 2010), this paper extends the international organisational behaviour literature by investigating the relationship between these in Pakistan, a context hitherto under-researched.

In the following sections, a review of literature is presented that sets the stage for an ethical leadership-driven approach to subsequent hypothesis development. The study’s design and data collection method are then detailed and data findings interpreted. Following this, the findings are discussed and practice implications provided. Finally, the paper concludes with an outline of new research directions arising from the present study. It is hoped that this paper will mark a further step towards the creation of positive work environments across cultures by advancing knowledge on the prevention of workplace bullying in two countries.

1.1. The literature review

The most widely applied definition of workplace bullying in international literature comes from Einarsen et al. (2011):

Bullying at work means harassing, offending, socially excluding someone, or negatively affecting someone’s work tasks. In order for the label bullying (or mobbing) to be applied to a particular activity, interaction, or process, it has to occur repeatedly and regularly (e.g., weekly) and over a period of time (e.g., about six months). Bullying is an escalated process in the course of which the person confronted ends up in an inferior position and becomes the target of systematic negative social acts.

This definition asserts that workplace bullying encompasses frequent, persistent and escalating negative social behaviour in the power relationship between one or more perpetrators and one or more of their targets. The power differences have been linked to the inability of the targeted persons to escape or defend themselves due to being in a position of inferior power. It is also widely agreed that workplace bullying is a misuse of power by its holder (Hoel, Glasø, Hetland, Cooper, & Einarsen, 2010; Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011).

The power differences in a work environment, although not limited to a hierarchical power base, are nevertheless formalised in the boss-subordinate relationship. While workplace bullying can occur at any hierarchical level within a work environment (Branch et al., 2013), research indicates that it is commonly a downward process, with supervisors and managers as typical perpetrators in up to 80% of bullying cases (Hoel et al., 2010). In fact, research has established that leadership style is a key predictor of bullying within a work environment (Einarsen et al., 2013, pp. 129–154; Francioli et al., 2015; Nielsen, 2013). Leymann (1996), Einarsen (1999) and Salin (2003) argued that workplace bullying persists mainly because the leadership permits the behaviour, either directly by engaging in it, or indirectly by failing to punish those who perpetrate it. As Einarsen, Raknes, and Matthiesen (1994) noted, workplace bullying is a sign of ineffective leadership even in the absence of downward bullying. Salin (2003) concurred with

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