



The moderating effects of psychological detachment and thoughts of revenge in workplace bullying

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ABSTRACT

Bullying at work has been receiving an increasing amount of research attention as an important social stressor in work contexts. Extant research has concentrated overwhelmingly on work related predictors of bullying. However, there is a lack of studies focusing on individual moderators of the experience of bullying. The aim of the present study was to examine the moderating role of psychological detachment and thoughts of revenge in the workplace bullying process. To minimize the effect of common method variance, we tested our hypothesis using a research design in which we collected data at two points in time separated by 1 month. A total of 523 individuals responded to both phases, with 511 useable surveys. Results revealed that psychological detachment moderates the relationship between (1) role conflict and workplace bullying and between (b) bullying and psychological strain. Similarly, thoughts of revenge moderate the relationship between role conflict and bullying. The findings are discussed in light of the cognitive activation theory of stress.

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1. Introduction

Bullying at work has been receiving an increasing amount of research attention in the literature over the past decade as an important social stressor in work contexts. Approximately 4–10% of the work population in Europe has reported being exposed to serious bullying at the workplace, whereas approximately 8–10% is exposed to less systematic bullying behaviors (Zapf, Einarsen, Hoel, & Vartia, 2003). Definitions of workplace bullying usually have emphasized exposure to repeat and enduring negative acts and behaviors. The most widely accepted definition of bullying is:

“Bullying at work means harassing, offending, socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone’s work tasks. In order for the label bullying 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 escalating process in the course of which the person confronted ends up in an inferior position and becomes the target of systematic negative social acts” (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003, p. 15).

Theoretical models of workplace bullying have focused for the most part on those work and organizational stressors that play a central role in the etiology and maintenance of this phenomenon.

Accordingly, most research on this topic has focused on organizational and situational factors as predictors of bullying. This approach has been named the work environment hypothesis (Hoel & Salin, 2003). This hypothesis, postulates that a poor psychosocial work environment will create conditions that may lead up to bullying at work. However, a recent meta-analysis has showed that both environmental and individual difference factors potentially contributed to bullying (Bowling & Beehr, 2006). Indeed, the fact that not all individuals who experience significant levels of bullying at work develop a health problem has led, in part, to the recognition that personality and individual factors are important components of this process. Thus, researchers are increasingly recognizing that individual differences cannot be ignored when it comes to explaining and predicting workplace bullying.

In contrast to existing research, which has concentrated overwhelmingly on work related predictors of bullying, to date, there is a lack of studies focusing on individual moderators of the experience of bullying. This is not surprising, because as Bowling and Beehr (2006) has pointed out, researchers might be reluctant to follow such an approach for fear that results could reinforce a tendency to blame the victim. Thus, Leymann (1996) strongly opposed the idea that personality traits influence the probability of becoming a target of workplace bullying. However, several studies have found that victims’ personality and individual factors are associated with bullying. For instance, Coyne, Seigne, and Randall (2000), found that victims of bullying tended to be less extraverted

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and independent and more unstable and conscientious compared to a non-victims sample. On the other hand, results of the study conducted by Matthiesen and Einarsen (2007) revealed that targets of bullying showed low levels of self-esteem and social competence. Thus, it has been shown that there are consistent differences in the personality of victims and non-victims of workplace bullying (Zapf & Einarsen, 2003). Based on the above mentioned research, the idea behind the present study is that personality characteristics may moderate the process of workplace bullying. We seek to broaden the range of possible moderator variables by studying the role of psychological detachment and thoughts of revenge, in order to reach a better understanding of bullying process.

Psychological detachment from work has been defined by Etzion, Eden, and Lapidot (1998) as “the individual’s sense of being away from the work situation” (p. 579), which has been shown to be one of core components of recovery from job strain (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007), that replenish resources and improve individual health and wellbeing. For example, Etzion et al. (1998) study showed that detachment moderated the relationship between stressors and burnout. More recently, using daily survey data, Sonnentag and Bayer (2005) found that individuals experiencing psychological detachment from work during leisure time reported better mood and less fatigue.

Rumination about job-related issues may be seen as the opposite construct of psychological detachment from work. This concept may be broadly defined as a maladaptive cognitive process involving repetitive thoughts and feelings about past events that are intrusive and aversive (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991). Recent research suggests that there are different types of rumination (Treynor, Gonzalez, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2003). One of these variants that seem to be close related to aggression is anger rumination (Bushman, 2002). Sukhodolsky, Golub, and Cromwell (2001) have conceptualized this construct as “unintentional and recurrent cognitive processes that emerge during and continue after an episode of anger experience” (p. 690). So far, numerous studies have pointed to anger rumination as being negatively associated with health and wellbeing. For example, it has been found that anger rumination leads to increases in sympathetic nervous system activation (Ray, Wilhem, & Gross, 2008), and creates a vulnerability for cardiovascular disease (Brosschot, Gerin, & Thayer, 2006). One of the most important components of anger rumination is thoughts of revenge. The available evidence from studies suggests that feelings of revenge also are linked to depression and reduced life satisfaction (Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2007). Thus, it seems fairly reasonable to expect that individuals that tend to ruminate about anger events, such as workplace bullying, are likely to experience health problems.

For the purposes of this study, we founded our hypotheses on the Cognitive Activation Theory of Stress (CATS; Ursin & Eriksen, 2004), that provide a useful framework for understanding the effects of psychological detachment and thoughts of revenge. The

core assumption of the CATS model is that repeated or chronic cognitive activation, such as worry or rumination, produced by stress may prolong physiological activation and lead to impairment in health. In this line of argument, Brosschot et al. (2006) have argued that perseverative cognition prolongs a stressor’s effects by maintaining its cognitive representation. Recently, it has been found that rumination impedes the recovery process by prolonging physiological activation (McCullough, Orsulak, Brandon, & Akers, 2007).

Building upon this theoretical framework, we developed the following research hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. Psychological detachment and thoughts of revenge will moderate the relationship between work stressors (workload and role conflict) and workplace bullying, such that work stressors will be (a) less strongly associated with bullying among individuals who experience high detachment from work and (b) more strongly associated with bullying among individuals who experience high levels of thoughts of revenge.

Hypothesis 2. Psychological detachment and thoughts of revenge will moderate the relationship between workplace bullying and psychological strain, such bullying will be (a) less strongly associated with psychological strain among individuals who experience high detachment from work and (b) more strongly associated with psychological strain among individuals who experience high levels of thoughts of revenge.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

The majority of studies on workplace bullying have employed cross-sectional research, designs that tend to inflate the relation between stressors-strain, due to common method variance (CMV). Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, and Podsakoff (2003), recommended a temporal separation by introducing a time lag between the measurement of the predictor and criterion variables, in order to minimize the potential biasing effects of CMV. Thus, we tested the hypotheses using a research design in which we collected data at two points in time separated by 1 month (see Table 1). Participants were employees of three telecommunications companies, located in the city of Madrid (Spain). 1000 questionnaires were distributed, accompanied by a cover letter explaining the aim of the study. Participation was voluntary, and responses were anonymous. At Time 1, we received 607 questionnaires (response rate = 60.7%), whereas 539 (response rate = 53.9%) were returned at Time 2. A total of 523 employees participated in both phases of the study, with 511 usable surveys.

Fifty-five percent of the respondents were female (283), the mean age was 31.15 years (SD = 5.40), and their average of work experience was 6.10 years (SD = 4.50). Moreover, chi-square and *t*-tests revealed no significant differences between those participating in both phases and those who completed only the Time 1

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations among the study variables (*N* = 511).

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Role conflict (T1)	2.2	0.7	(0.70)						
Workload (T1)	2.43	0.93	0.45**	(0.79)					
Negative affectivity (T1)	2.44	0.55	0.18**	0.04	(0.79)				
Psychological detachment (T1)	3.97	0.94	−0.08	−0.04	−0.25**	(0.85)			
Thoughts of revenge (T1)	2.5	0.86	0.26**	0.15*	0.26**	−0.24**	(0.75)		
Workplace bullying (T2)	2.17	0.88	0.46**	0.49**	0.34**	−0.16**	0.32**	(0.87)	
Psychological strain (T2)	1.6	0.53	0.42**	0.39**	0.34**	−0.12**	0.28**	0.53**	(0.78)

Note: Coefficient alphas appear along the diagonal in parentheses.

T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2.

* *p* < 0.05.

** *p* < 0.01.

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