



The personality traits of workplace bullies are often shared by their victims: Is there a dark side to victims?

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 11 July 2012

Received in revised form 27 November 2012

Accepted 28 November 2012

Available online 25 December 2012

Keywords:

Bullying
Personality
Machiavellianism
Narcissism
Psychoticism
Aggression
Sensation seeking

ABSTRACT

In this exploratory study, we examined the extent to which both workplace bullies and victims possess bully-typifying traits, using a 22-item scale that simultaneously measures perpetrators and targets of negative workplace acts. Participants were 224 Canadian university students aged 18–47 with prior work experience. Bivariate correlational analyses determined that bullying others was positively associated with measures of Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychoticism, aggression, and disinhibition. Being a victim was positively associated with the same Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychoticism, and aggression measures. Hierarchical regression analyses indicated that an “alternative dark triad” of Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychoticism related significantly to bullying scores; while psychoticism and Machiavellianism related significantly to victim scores. Aggression and sensation seeking measures failed to account for significant variance in bully or victim scores beyond the triad variables. The vast majority of bullies (89.7%) and many victims (41.7%) were bully/victims, operationally defined as being both perpetrators and targets at least once per week in the last 6 months. Researchers and employers would do well to recognize the presence of bully/victims in their efforts to understand and reduce workplace bullying.

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1. Introduction

An understanding of workplace bullying may help reduce the health and emotional costs for victims. Bullied employees are at increased risk of physical and psychological problems including depression, psychosomatic symptoms, post-traumatic stress, and coronary heart disease (Einarsen, Hoel, & Notelaers, 2009; Lee & Brotheridge, 2006; Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy, & Alberts, 2007). Workplace bullying has been cited with prevalence rates of 46.8%, 24.1%, and 15.8%, at least once weekly in American, Finnish, and Danish studies, respectively (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007). The Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised (NAQ-R) is a widely-used measure of bullying victimization which asks employees to report the extent to which they have experienced a variety of negative acts at work. We modified the victim-oriented NAQ-R into a Perpetrator-Target Scale (PTS), creating “bully” and “victim” subscales, which simultaneously measure both perpetrators and targets of bullying.

Bullies and victims appear to share personality traits that are more typically attributed to bullies. Scattered observations have

found that victims possess such bully-typifying traits as disagreeableness, dominance, and aggression (Archer, Ireland, & Power, 2007; Glaso, Nielsen, & Einarsen, 2009; Olweus, 1993). Bullies and victims may share personality traits because many are both perpetrators and targets of negative acts. In fact, Lee and Brotheridge (2006) found that 83% of bullies were also victims, and 50% of victims were also bullies, on a once weekly basis. Because victims are often bullies, we suspect that they possess some of the stable and enduring personality traits consistent with the bully role.

In addition, bullying researchers have recognized that the personalities of some persons are sufficiently provocative that others may respond by bullying them (Olweus, 1993; Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2007). Andersson and Pearson (1999), for example, have described the process whereby employees feel justified in responding aggressively to annoying co-workers whose behavior and attitudes fall outside of social norms. Many provocative personalities are also bully/victims, as they may be perpetrators as well as targets (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2007). The provocative traits of victims range from the aggressive, to those deemed “annoying” or socially inappropriate (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2007), labels that are likewise applicable to the traits of bullies. As an example, the bully-typifying trait verbal aggression may be directly associated with the bullying of others (Parkins, Fishbein, & Ritchey, 2006). It is also, however, associated with argumentativeness (Diamond, 2005), a possible

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“annoying” factor that may provoke others to bully those who score highly on the trait.

In this study, we have compiled a number of personality traits that have been either empirically or theoretically linked with bullying others; we expect victims to share these traits. Machiavellianism, narcissism, and subclinical psychopathy, the so-called “dark triad” of personality, have been associated with bullying. Psychopathy was most strongly associated with bullying, followed by Machiavellianism and narcissism in a recent workplace bullying study (Baughman, Dearing, Giammarco, & Vernon, 2012). Those high in Machiavellianism are believed to “employ aggressive, exploiting, and devious behavior to achieve personal and organizational goals,” with little thought for the welfare of others (Ricks & Fraedrich, 1999, p. 197–198). High Machiavellian employees have self-reported as more comfortable with violating others’ rights than low scorers (Winter, Stylianou, & Giacalone, 2004). Narcissistic individuals are grandiose, with a sense of entitlement and superiority which may cause them to feel entitled to treat others badly. Narcissism scores in undergraduate students have been found to be positively associated with self- and observer-reports of antisocial behavior, on a measure which included bullying items (Paulhus, Robins, Trzesniewski, & Tracy, 2004).

Those high in subclinical psychopathy are more likely to perform antisocial behaviors and are typically cold, manipulative, impulsive, thrill-seeking, and distrustful (LeBreton, Binning, & Adorno, 2006). Eysenckian psychoticism was derived as a complex supertrait in the “big three” model that addresses the major factors of personality (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1994). This measure has been characterized as a construct related to, or on continuum with, subclinical psychopathy (Corr, 2010; Zuckerman, 1991). Considerable theory and research supports the instrument’s utility for normal populations, involving hundreds of studies in many countries. This broadly heterogeneous scale addresses a large range of subtraits, many of which are of relevance for bullying research. The high scorer is unempathetic, manipulative, irresponsible, risk-taking (disregarding danger), inhumane, impulsive, insensitive, hostile (even to own kin), aggressive (even to loved ones), unconventional (with a liking for odd and unusual things), under socialized, disrespectful of laws, manners, and traditions, likes to upset and make fools of others, is troublesome, and expresses antisocial attitudes and behaviors (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1994). A junior version of this scale has correlated positively with bullying in school children (Connolly & O’Moore, 2003).

Aggression and sensation seeking are also of interest to bullying research. Workplace bullying has correlated significantly with Buss-Perry Aggression subscales in employed college students (Parkins et al., 2006). Zuckerman (2007) concluded that sensation seeking was associated with aggression and antisocial behavior, finding the disinhibition and boredom susceptibility components most related to aggression scale scores. Bullies, like young offenders (Gudjonsson & Sigurdsson, 2007), may perpetrate for excitement, to relieve monotony, or through low impulse control.

In this study, we examine the extent to which victims and bullies possess bully typifying traits. It is hypothesized that the bully-typifying traits Machiavellianism, narcissism, Eysenckian psychoticism, aggression, and sensation seeking will associate positively with both bully and victim scores.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

A sample of 224 undergraduate students was recruited from psychology and other programs (business, engineering, computer science) at three Canadian universities. All participants were re-

quired to have been employed at the time of, and for 6 months prior to, the study. Respondents completed a test battery consisting of personality instruments, a 22-item scale which simultaneously measures perpetrators and targets of negative workplace acts (the PTS), and a series of demographic items. Signed consent was given for participating in a study involving “workplace behaviors.” Participant pool recruits received extra credit in their psychology courses, and nonpool recruits received gift certificates for the value of five Canadian dollars for participation. There were no statistically significant differences between the extra credit and gift certificate groups in terms of scores on the perpetrator and target subscales.

2.2. Measures of personality

Machiavellianism was measured on the 10-item Machiavellianism Scale (Allsopp, Eysenck, & Eysenck, 1991) ($\alpha = .79$), and narcissism on the 16-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI-16; Ames, Rose, & Anderson, 2006) ($\alpha = .75$). The Psychoticism subscale of the Revised Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ-R; Eysenck & Eysenck, 1994), slightly abridged for internal consistency reliability in the current sample, measured psychoticism ($\alpha = .66$ for 22 items).

To measure aggression, we used three subscales from the Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire, Short Form (BPAQ-SF; Diamond, 2005): Anger, Hostility, and Verbal Aggression ($\alpha = .81$ for 8 items). The Brief Sensation Seeking Scale (BSSS; Hoyle, Stephenson, Palmgreen, Lorch, & Donohew, 2002), an 8-item abbreviated counterpart of the widely-used Sensation Seeking Scale Form V (Zuckerman, 1994), was used to measure sensation seeking ($\alpha = .78$).

2.3. Measures of bullying and victimization

The Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised (NAQ-R) was developed as a comprehensive-yet-brief scale to survey the negative acts experienced by victims of workplace bullying. It consists of 22 items ranging from “opinions and views ignored” to “threats of violence or abuse.” The items are measured on a 5-point frequency scale ranging from “never” to “daily.”

Support has been provided for the construct validity of the NAQ-R. High scorers report more health complaints, reduced performance, increased absenteeism due to illness, and a greater desire to change jobs than low scorers. Those employees who experience severe bullying are more likely to report low organizational satisfaction, high stress from relationships with colleagues, and more autocratic leadership than those who experience occasional bullying (Einarsen et al., 2009). In terms of internal consistency, Cronbach alphas of .81–.92 were reported by Lutgen-Sandvik et al. (2007) for Negative Acts Questionnaire (NAQ) measures.

We modified the NAQ-R, intending to retain the scale’s desirable psychometric qualities, while at the same time generating an item-by-item measure of bullying others that corresponds with the original victim-only scale. This allowed us to obtain bully and victim data simultaneously for each participant. The former NAQ-R items were reworded to accommodate the bully-and-victim format. For example, the original NAQ-R item 1, “Someone withholding information which affects your performance,” became “Withheld information which affects job performance.” This item and others (1–22) were followed by columns headed “Others did to me,” and “I did to others,” (a format employed previously by Lee & Brotheridge, 2006) to gather data on targets and perpetrators, respectively. Table 1 shows the first three PTS items, illustrating the general strategy employed in the simultaneous testing of bullies and victims. Study participants were not required to

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