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Workplace harassment: Deterring role of transformational leadership and core job characteristics

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Summary Theoretical arguments suggest that transformational leaders deter work harassment by facilitating a moral and ethical environment, by effectively managing stress and employee conflicts, by addressing self-worth of the followers, and by facilitating the core job characteristics of autonomy, feedback, and task identity. In the present study we investigated the potential effect of transformational leadership and the core job characteristics as deterrents of workplace harassment. The findings in a sample of 320 employees demonstrated that the probability to report elevated levels of work harassment was negatively related to transformational leadership. In addition, the relationship between transformational leadership and workplace harassment decreased when three job characteristics were included in the analysis. The mediation analysis in process (Hayes, 2012) indicated that only autonomy partially explained the indirect relationship between transformational leadership and harassment. The present study demonstrated that a transformational leader facilitates autonomy and provides employees with the resources of independence and power. This deters work harassment, because the target does not appear in an inferior position in comparison with the instigator.

Introduction

Workplace harassment has received attention since the 1980s, when Leymann published his ideas on negative workplace behavior (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2010; Zapf & Einarsen, 2005). Björkqvist, Österman, and Hjelt-Bäck (1994) claimed that work harassment can be described as "repeated activities, with the aim of bringing mental (but sometimes also physical) pain, and directed toward one or more individuals who, for one reason or another, are not able to defend themselves" (pp. 173—174). Though other researchers since Leymann have used different labels such as bullying, mobbing, or work harassment, most researchers agree that they describe

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similar or equivalent phenomenon (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2010).

Research related to work harassment seems to be of high value in Lithuania. For example, a representative study in two metropolitan cities in Lithuania indicated a prevalence rate of 25.4% (Pajarskienė, Vėbraitė, Andruškienė, & Jurgutis, 2012). Malinauskienė, Obelenis, Šopagienė, and Mačionytė (2007) presented a 6.4% of frequent exposure to workplace harassment and 19.1% of occasional harassment among teachers. European Working Conditions Survey (2005) demonstrated that work harassment in Lithuanian organizations is higher than the average rate in European organizations. Although statistical and methodological moderators may explain such high prevalence rates (Nielsen, Matthiesen, & Einarsen, 2010), the situation in Lithuania requires closer attention; specifically, it requires research on potential causes of workplace bullying to prevent the dysfunctional phenomenon.

A considerable body of research has been conducted with regard to the antecedents of work harassment. In line with the work environment hypothesis (Leymann, 1993), suggesting that a poor work environment may increase the prevalence of work harassment, previous studies demonstrated that Karasek's (1979) Demand Control Model, Warr's (1990) work environmental features, the Michigan Model (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964) and the Demand Resources Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) are all useful theoretical frameworks to understand potential antecedents of bullying (Baillien, De Cuyper, & De Witte, 2011; Balducci, Cecchin, & Fraccaroli, 2012; Hauge et al., 2011; Notelaers, De Witte, & Einarsen, 2010a, 2010b; Van den Broeck, Baillien, & De Witte, 2011). In contrast to the work-environment studies that began in early 1990s (Einarsen, Raknes, & Matthiesen, 1994; Matthiesen, Raknes, & Røkkum, 1989), the first empirical studies linking leadership to bullying started approximately a decade later. Skogstad, Einarsen, Torsheim, Aasland, and Hetland (2007) and Hauge, Skogstad, and Einarsen (2007) pointed to the importance of passive and destructive forms of leadership to explain bullying. Hoel, Glasø, Hetland, Cooper, and Einarsen (2010) reported the detrimental effects of autocratic leadership. Other researchers highlighted the importance of ethical leadership (Stouten et al., 2011) and the moderating role of leader's social support (Hauge et al., 2011; Tuckey, Dollard, Hosking, & Winefield, 2009). However, few studies have addressed the deterring role of constructive leadership styles on workplace harassment (Cemaloğlu, 2011; Lee, 2011). This seems surprising considering the common agreement that leadership plays a key role in the development of harassment (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011; Leymann, 1993; Zapf, Escartin, & Einarsen, 2011).

Analysis of constructive leadership, and transformational leadership in particular (Bass & Riggio, 2006), may shed more light by its potential deterring effect on workplace harassment. Thus, in the present study we analyzed the relationship between transformational leadership and work harassment. In addition, we integrated the second dominant factor of the work-environment approach, i.e. job design (Baillien, De Cuyper, et al., 2011; Baillien & De Witte, 2009; Einarsen, 1996; Hauge, 2010; Leymann, 1996; Notelaers, 2011). We assumed that the relationship between transformational leadership and workplace harassment would have a direct as well as indirect effect (e.g. via three core job characteristics of autonomy, feedback, and task identity). The latter assumption is based on Bass and Riggio's (2006) proposition that transformational leaders create and reinforce norms and unwritten rules within organization, and Piccolo and Colquitt's (2006) findings that indicated that Hackman and Oldham's (1976) core job characteristics explained the relationship between transformational leadership and job behaviors.

Work harassment and transformational leadership

First introduced by Burns (1978), transformational leadership became a part of the full range of leadership (FRL) model together with transactional leadership and laissez-faire behavior (Bass & Riggio, 2006). According to Bass and Riggio (2006) the most constructive leaders are those who display transformational leadership behaviors in addition to transactional ones. Various researchers (i.e. Bass & Riggio, 2006; Carless, Wearing, & Mann, 2000; Popper & Mayseless, 2003) argued that transformational leadership is able to build certain positive conditions in the organizational setting; we argue it may deter harassment in the workplace.

The forgoing assumption is based on research that the transformational leader contributes to preventing harassment by addressing the moral and ethical environment (Burns, 1978) and promoting pro-social values (Popper & Mayseless, 2003). For example, Bass and Riggio (2006) explained that a transformational leader facilitates morality and equality by performing under the principles of mutual respect. By valuing all followers' opinions and opposing discrimination or any type of racism, transformational leaders promote morality and pro-social values. One study in particular found that a transformational leader deters work harassment via employees' perceptions of a climate of respect (Lee, 2011).

Second, a strenuous work environment seems to be a cause of work harassment (Baillien, Neyens, De Witte, & De Cuyper, 2009; Balducci et al., 2012; Notelaers et al., 2013). A transformational leader, with a focus on being a social supporter, can help followers to manage stress more effectively (Bass & Riggio, 2006) and therefore diminish the likelihood of exposure to harassment. Popper and Mayseless (2003) proposed that followers turn to a leader when they face threats or hostile behaviors. Hence, in early stage of workplace harassment, where workplace harassment is difficult to detect (Björkqvist, 1992), but has a strenuous effect on the target (Notelaers, Einarsen, De Witte, & Vermunt, 2006), the target can address the issue with the leader.

Third, according to scholars, conflicts (Zapf, 1999) and poor conflict management skills (Baillien, Notelaers, De Witte, & Matthiesen, 2011; Zapf & Gross, 2001) increase harassment in the workplace (Baillien et al., 2009). In case of a conflict, the transformational leader pictures the conflict as a challenge or learning opportunity that requires a collaborative effort (Carless et al., 2000); a transformational leader shows that neither party can get along without the assistance of the other (Bass & Riggio, 2006). By increasing the likelihood of effective conflict management (Bass & Riggio, 2006), a transformational leader can deter work harassment (Baillien et al., 2009).