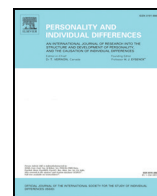




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Personality traits as predictors or outcomes of being exposed to bullying in the workplace[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Workplace bullying is a well-known and clearly defined phenomenon. The research on the profile of bullying targets indicates that employees exposed to bullying experience high levels of neuroticism and conscientiousness and low levels of agreeableness and social skills. However, although it is agreed that individual antecedents such as the personalities of targets may contribute to the escalation of bullying, there has been no longitudinal research aimed at determining the individual antecedents or the effects of workplace bullying. In the present full two-wave panel design study ($N = 190$), workers filled out the Negative Activities Questionnaire (NAQ-R) and the NeoFive Factor Inventory (NEOFFI) twice, with a six-month interval between them. The results indicate that exposure to bullying in the first wave leads to a decrease in agreeableness in the second wave.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Workplace bullying

Workplace bullying is a well-known and clearly defined phenomenon (Caponecchia & Wyatt, 2012; Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011; Lipinski & Crothers, 2014). The definition of workplace bullying has some key components. Bullying concerns the frequency of negative behavior (harassing, offending, socially excluding, or negatively affecting someone's work) occurring regularly (e.g., weekly) and over a period of time (e.g., about six months). Bullying involves an escalating process during which an unbalanced power relationship develops between the target and the perpetrator (Einarsen et al., 2011). A substantial number of studies have been conducted to describe negative behavior, bullying prevalence and risk groups (Zapf, Escartin, Einarsen, Hoel, & Vartia, 2011), the effects of bullying on targets' well-being (Høgh, Mikkelsen, & Hansen, 2012; Tehrani, 2012), the effects of bullying on an organization (Caponecchia & Wyatt, 2012; Hoel, Sheehan,

Cooper, & Einarsen, 2011), and organizational factors that contribute to bullying (Hauge et al., 2011).

The research on the antecedents of workplace bullying has mostly been focused on investigating the impact of organizational factors (the work environment hypothesis (Hauge et al., 2011; Leymann, 1996) and the personalities of bullying targets (the individual dispositions hypothesis (Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Bowling, Beehr, Bennett, & Watson, 2010; Coyne, Seigne, & Randall, 2000; Glasø, Matthiesen, Nielsen, & Einarsen, 2007; Nielsen & Knardahl, 2015; Lind, Glasø, Pallesen, & Einarsen, 2009)). According to the work environment hypothesis, the targets' personality traits play a minor role in explaining workplace bullying. While taking individual dispositions into account, however, some have suggested that personality may predispose workers to bullying (e.g., Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Bowling et al., 2010; Coyne et al., 2000; Lind et al., 2009). Others have argued that individual dispositions are outcomes rather than causes of bullying (e.g., Glasø et al., 2007). As previous studies on the relationship between personality and bullying has focused mainly on cross-sectional data (e.g., Glasø et al., 2007; Lind et al., 2009), in this prospective study, we aim to examine whether personality traits predict victimization from workplace bullying or whether being subjected to bullying alters personality traits.

1.2. Bullying and personality

A few studies have examined the relationship between individual dispositions and bullying. These findings suggest that in comparison

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with oppressors and non-victims, the target group scores higher on neuroticism, depression (Zapf, 1999), and negative affectivity (Bowling et al., 2010), lower on emotional stability (Coyne et al., 2000; Glasø et al., 2007) and self-esteem (Harvey & Keashly, 2003; O'Moore & Kirkham, 2001), and higher on temperamental emotional reactivity (Gamian-Wilk, 2010). Moreover, bullying targets have also been shown to score lower on aggressiveness and social skills as well as on extraversion and assertiveness (Coyne et al., 2000; Glasø et al., 2007). Targets are not only less social and talkative but also less likeable, understanding, and diplomatic (Glasø et al., 2007). Other data indicate that targets are achievement-oriented, conscientious, rigid, and intolerant of diversity (Glasø et al., 2007).

Taken together, these research findings suggest that workers who have been exposed to bullying display four major characteristics: negative emotionality, and thus high neuroticism (Bowling et al., 2010; Coyne et al., 2000; Glasø et al., 2007); poor social skills, and thus low agreeableness and extraversion; and high conscientiousness (Glasø et al., 2007). In a cross-sectional study, Lind et al. (2009) found that low agreeableness and high conscientiousness significantly predicted becoming a bullying target. Moreover, in one longitudinal study, negative emotionality predicted being victimized at the workplace (Bowling et al., 2010; Nielsen & Knardahl, 2015). However, other results suggest that changes in personality traits are outcomes rather than antecedents of being bullied (Nielsen & Knardahl, 2015). It is therefore crucial to conduct more research on the relationship between personality and bullying. The purpose of this study is to evaluate two alternative explanations: do personality traits predispose targets to victimization from bullying (causal hypothesis), or do personality traits change as a result of being subjected to bullying (reverse causal hypothesis)? The current study was designed to address this issue.

1.3. Personality as a cause and outcome of negative social interactions

Personality traits encompass a set of relatively stable dispositions that enable an individual to think, feel, and act in a certain, consistent way (Zawadzki, Strelau, Szczepaniak, & Śliwińska, 1998). In the majority of theoretical models, the targets' personality is a central factor in explaining victimization from bullying (Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Coyne, 2011; Einarsen et al., 2011). It has been argued that individuals' dispositions may trigger negative behavior from coworkers and employers. According to this view, employees with certain traits or vulnerabilities (Bowling & Beehr, 2006) may violate workplace expectations and norms, thus aggravating others. Some research and meta-analysis findings support this notion: A target's negative emotionality, neuroticism, and self-esteem may predict victimization (Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Nielsen & Knardahl, 2015).

However, there has been growing debate surrounding personality changes as a result of experiences, social expectations, and the demands of changing roles (Specht, Egloff, & Schmukle, 2011). Recently, the interplay of major life events and personality has been highlighted (Bleidorn, Kandler, Riemann, Angleitner, & Spinath, 2012; Löckenhoff, Terracciano, Patriciu, Eaton, & Costa, 2009; Roberts, Wood, & Smith, 2005; Scollon & Diener, 2006; Specht et al., 2011). Personality change as a result of life events has been studied in the context of social relationships and work experiences; events such as getting married or divorced, having a baby, or starting a job have a significant impact on personality changes (Specht et al., 2011). However, little attention has been paid to bullying as a workplace trauma that can cause personality changes. We argue that bullying is a major event connected with prolonged stress that may significantly impact personality.

Bullying is a process during which negative interactions escalate and both bullies and targets display a dynamic series of responses. The perpetrators exhibit a variety of negative behaviors: personal bullying (e.g., insulting, criticizing, rumor spreading, isolating), work-related bullying (e.g., work overload, irrational deadlines), and physical intimidation (e.g., threatening) (Einarsen et al., 2011). At different stages of the

process, targets undertake a variety of strategies (Høgh & Dofradottir, 2001; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006; Zapf & Gross, 2001) that are ultimately ineffective. As a result, they experience anxiety, negative emotionality, depressive symptoms including suicidal tendencies (Leymann, 1996), a lack of a sense of power and control over their situation (Einarsen et al., 2011; Lewis, 2004), stress symptoms (Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2002; Marchand, Demers, & Durand, 2005) including post-traumatic stress symptoms (Tehrani, 2012), chronic fatigue, and problems with concentration, sleeping, and general health (Hansen et al., 2006; Høgh, Mikkelsen, & Hansen, 2011).

Moreover, regarding findings on social rejection, in the case of chronic and unfair rejection and victimization, targets tend to behave aggressively or withdraw since they believe there is no hope of repairing the social relations in question (e.g., Maner, DeWall, Baumeister, & Schaller, 2007; Smart-Richman & Leary, 2009). Social rejection damages self-regulation and is connected with a significant drop in cognitive functioning and a lower resistance to temptations (Baumeister & Dewart, 2005). Weakened self-regulation may also impede proper emotional, cognitive, and social functioning. As Baumeister and Dewart (2005) observed, this process can lead to a downward spiral in which social exclusion promotes socially disvalued behaviors; this, in turn, can elicit further social rejection.

1.4. Research goals and hypothesis

In sum, as a dynamic involving long-lasting victimization and rejection, bullying results in negative outcomes and impairment in emotional, cognitive, and social functioning. It is therefore possible that exposure to workplace bullying results in increased neuroticism and decreased agreeableness, extraversion, and conscientiousness.

In the corpus of workplace bullying research, few longitudinal studies have been conducted, and those which have were mainly concerned with the health outcomes of bullying. Few studies have used a longitudinal design to measure the individual dispositions of bullying targets; yet, such designs can be useful for understanding both the causes and effects of workplace bullying as well as its development (Zapf, Dorman, & Frese, 1996). Therefore, the purpose of the present research was to determine the cause-effect relations between personality dispositions and exposure to bullying via a longitudinal study. Using a full, two-wave panel design with a six-month time interval, we tested both causal hypotheses and reverse causal relationships. We aimed to verify whether personality traits are potential predictors of bullying (after Lind et al., 2009). We therefore tested the following hypotheses:

H1a. We expect that lower agreeableness will predict exposure to workplace bullying.

H2a. We expect that lower extraversion will predict exposure to workplace bullying.

H3a. We expect that higher conscientiousness will predict exposure to workplace bullying.

H4a. We expect that higher neuroticism will predict exposure to workplace bullying.

Moreover, we tested reverse causal hypotheses. We aimed to verify whether bullying, as a process of long-lasting victimization, results in negative outcomes and impairment in social, emotional, and cognitive functioning. Thus, the following hypotheses were tested:

H1b. We expect that exposure to workplace bullying will predict lower agreeableness.

H2b. We expect that exposure to workplace bullying will predict lower extraversion.

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