Cyberbullying in the workplace

Although bullying has long been recognised as an issue which warrants concern and action, systematic research on the topic only really began in the late 1970s. However, since these initial beginnings, research and interest in the topic of bullying has mushroomed into a cross-context, global agenda. Initially focused within school contexts, understanding of the phenomenon has now extended to pre-school, residential care, relationships, families, the workplace, prisons and older people (Monks and Coyne, 2011). More recently, newer means of tormenting victims have evolved, to the extent that bullying enacted through technology or cyberbullying as it is currently defined – is now grabbing the attention of researchers, practitioners, the public and the media. Academic exploration of cyberbullying began around ten years ago, at a time when high speed internet services were being developed to allow broader access. Like much of the media coverage on the phenomenon, the focus of most research has been on cyberbullying perpetrated and received by children and adolescents. These studies have predominately investigated prevalence rates, frequency amongst different demographic groups and a range of negative outcomes (Tokunaga, 2010). Less publicised is workplace cyberbullying, a different though related concept which pertains to the repeated harassment of employees through communication media. This article will report on the field of workplace bullying, from which research on workplace cyberbullying has emerged. The unique features of the phenomenon will also be outlined, followed by hypothesised differences between workplace and school based cyberbullying.

Workplace Bullying

In the early 1990's Scandinavian and German researchers began to investigate bullying in the workplace. There has been much debate about the definitional elements of the phenomenon since then, yet researchers agree that to be considered bullying, behaviours must be repeated over a period of time (Leymann, 1996) and there must be a power disparity between the perpetrator and victim, such that the victim finds it difficult to defend themselves (Einarsen, Hoel & Notelaers, 2009). Consequently workplace bullying has been defined as *"repeated and persistent negative acts towards one or more individual(s), which involve a perceived power imbalance and create a hostile work environment."* (Salin, 2003, p.2). Prevalence rates of workplace bullying have been found to vary dramatically depending on measurement method, industrial sector and country (Grainger & Fitzner, 2007; Hoel & Cooper, 2000), with victim rates of 8.6% (Einarsen & Skogstad,1996), 13.6% (Zabrodska & Kveton, 2012) and 28% (Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy & Alberts, 2007) being reported.

At the broad level, workplace bullying can take one of two forms: predatory bullying whereby the perpetrator has an unprovoked intent to harm the target; and dispute-oriented bullying, where bullying is the product of on-going conflict between two parties of unequal strength (Einarsen, 1999). Various explanations have been proposed as to why it occurs, including the personality characteristics of perpetrators and victims, the nature of human interaction at work and the organisational climate (Hoel & Salin, 2003). Furthermore studies have shown that the experience of being bullied is associated with decreased well-being

(Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2003), lower job satisfaction (Hoel, Einarsen & Cooper, 2003) and anxiety (Quine, 2001).

Cyberbullying

A dual understanding of workplace bullying and youth based cyberbullying can aid researchers investigating cyberbullying in the workplace. Disagreement remains over whether cyberbullying should be considered a virtual form of regular bullying (Campbell, 2005), or whether it can be conceptualised as a unique form of bullying (Slonje & Smith, 2008). Certain features distinguish cyberbullying from traditional bullying, suggesting support for the latter perspective. For example, cyberbullying can be experienced in the victim's own home, which has traditionally been a place where people are protected from bullying. The perpetrator can also be unaware of the victim's reaction to cyberbullying, which can reduce empathy and increase misunderstandings (Slonje & Smith, 2008; Bhat, 2008). Additionally some forms of cyberbullying can be seen by a wider audience than offline bullying, thus a cyber victim may experience greater humiliation than during face-to-face bullying (Shariff, 2005). These features have led researchers to argue that cyberbullying has a stronger psychological impact than offline bullying (Dooley, Pyzalski & Cross, 2009).

Whether the nature of workplace cyberbullying differs from youth cyberbullying is currently unknown, although workplace bullying tends to be more subtle than playground bullying (Bjorkvist, Osterman & Lagerspetz, 1994; Thomas-Peter, 1997). It remains to be seen whether this is true of workplace cyberbullying compared to the adolescent form. However youth based cyberbullying may be more explicitly vicious because teenagers might think it unlikely that adults will read their blogs or social media postings (Huang & Chou, 2010). Furthermore, if discovered they may not be aware or care about the consequences of their actions. Comparatively there is more risk involved in cyberbullying at work because if discovered the perpetrator could be reprimanded or even dismissed. In particular, one might expect less explicit text based message in the workplace, because anything vicious written in a text message, email or social media posting could be used against the author in disciplinary procedures and legal action (Ariss, 2002).

A 2008 study involving over 500 British secondary school children found that more cyberbullying took place outside school as opposed to inside school (Smith et al, 2008). This finding was attributed to bans on mobile phones and the internet in some schools. An interesting avenue of study would therefore be to investigate whether more cyberbullying occurs either during or outside of work hours. The findings are likely to vary based upon the working context. For example, in workplaces such as supermarkets, building sites and restaurants where internet and phone access are limited, a greater level of cyberbullying may occur outside work hours. In contrast, one might expect more cyberbullying to occur during work hours in organisations reliant upon virtual communication, because technology is available during work time.

Finally, a common element of youth based cyberbullying is that perpetrators can bully anonymously. For example studies have estimated that 50-60% of victims do not know the

identity of the perpetrator (Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007). Whether perpetrators can cyber bully anonymously in a workplace context needs further investigation. On the one hand it may be very difficult to anonymously cyber bully a colleague at work as corporate email addresses and telephone numbers would reveal the identity of the perpetrator. On the other hand electronic bulletin or messaging boards which often allow employees to post incognito may provide an avenue for anonymous cyberbullying. Additionally the ease with which fake social media accounts can be created may allow for anonymous cyberbullying outside work hours.

Causes of cyberbullying

As a relatively new research area, understanding of the causes of cyberbullying has not yet been fully developed. It has been proposed that victims of face-to-face bullying may harass their perpetrators online as a means of retaliation (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). Whilst interviews with Swedish children revealed that in most cases cyberbullying had started from a face-to-face argument (Slonje, Smith & Frisen, 2013). Others have suggested that the characteristics of victims, such as high academic achievement (Huang & Chou, 2010) or poor social skills (Tokunaga, 2010) might enhance the probability of victimisation.

Only a handful of studies have been conducted on workplace cyberbullying, but research from the field of computer mediated communication may help explain why it occurs. Theories in this area highlight how communications media lack the contextual cues that aid awareness of a communication partner's situation, such as their work environment and mood (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986). As a result people become less wary of evaluation, less polite and more task focussed when working virtually. This may enhance the likelihood of negatively worded messages as people send messages without prior consideration of how they might be interpreted (Kiesler et al, 1984). The characteristics of technological communication media may also promote conflict. For example, Friedman and Currall (2003) argue that elements of email communication, such as overly long messages and weakened interpersonal bonds, increase the potential for disputes.

Further research is needed to understand the factors that motivate cyberbullying. Longitudinal research, conducted across several time points would be of particular benefit. Such research could help substantiate the claims of cyberbullying researchers who argue that cyberbullying exerts a more negative impact than traditional bullying. Additionally, the relationship between cyberbullying, academic achievement, well-being and absenteeism could be analysed in greater depth. Longitudinal research could also identify which strategies are most effective when coping with cyberbullying. It has been suggested that ignoring and avoidance strategies, which are considered less effective in coping with traditional bullying, may be more appropriate when combating cyberbullying (Smith et al, 2008).

Outcomes of cyberbullying

The experience of being cyberbullied is a stressful one and the impact is likely to vary depending on its severity and frequency. Behavioural effects, such as increased absenteeism (Katzer, Fetchenhauer, & Belschak, 2009) and lower academic achievement (Beran & Li,

2007) have been associated with cyberbullying. Psychological effects have also been identified, including depression (Didden et al, 2009), social anxiety (Juvoven & Gross, 2008) and lower self-esteem (Katzer et al, 2009). Children and adolescents have developed novel coping strategies to protect themselves from these effects. Changing phone numbers, login passwords and online identities, as well as blocking abusers are some of the technological strategies reported in the literature (Slonje, Smith & Frisen, 2013). Traditional responses such as telling a parent or teacher and seeking social support have also been found (Tokunaga, 2010).

Much less is known about the outcomes of cyberbullying in the workplace. A 2005 study by Baruch (2005) found that bullying via email was associated with an intention to leave the organisation, lower job satisfaction and anxiety. However apart from this study limited research has documented the impact of cyberbullying on employees. Given the increasingly global nature of work and the implementation of new communication media in organisations, further research is needed on cyberbullying in the workplace. Three studies were therefore conducted by a team of researchers from Nottingham University and the University of Sheffield which investigated the experience of cyberbullying on staff at UK universities. The initial research showed that increased exposure to cyberbullying behaviours was related to increased mental strain and reduced job satisfaction across university staff. The effects of cyberbullying also appeared to be stronger than exposure to offline bullying. Further details of this study can be obtained by emailing Sam Farley at sjfarley1@sheffield.ac.uk.

Conclusion

A review of workplace bullying research has been presented in this article, along with hypothesised differences between youth based and work based cyberbullying. The unique features of cyberbullying were outlined, which some researchers argue make it more psychologically harmful than offline bullying. Analysis of new research on workplace cyberbullying provided support for this proposition.

In comparison to youth based cyberbullying, workplace cyberbullying has received little academic or media interest. Yet this is starting to change as virtual communication is becoming the preferred method of conversing with ones colleagues (ACAS, 2012). Further research is needed to identify the nature and causes of workplace cyberbullying, as evidence accumulated from future studies can aid the development of intervention strategies, thus reducing its impact.

To address the current lack of workplace cyberbullying research, a study is currently being planned to develop a questionnaire that could accurately assess cyberbullying in the workplace. The creation of a measurement tool will allow organisations to capture the prevalence, frequency and severity of cyberbullying, this is essential because governments and HR departments need correct estimates in order to budget time and resources to deal with the problem. To successfully carry out this research a number of participants are needed, if you would like to be involved in the study please contact:

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