Causes of bullying in the workplace among primary school teachers of your paper

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Abstract

Workplace bullying is a subtle manifestation of disturbed relationships in the workplace and it is considered an extreme type of social stressor at work. The present study is based on research regarding bullying in the workplace, specifically involving teachers in elementary schools in the Czech Republic. The sample consisted of 13 elementary school teachers who had been exposed to regular bullying by their colleagues or senior executives for at least 6 months. Based on in-depth interviews and subsequent coding and categorisation of statements, the main aim of the research is to analyse the factors causing bullying in the workplace. The teachers who experienced bullying in the role of victims state that the main reasons for this kind of aggressive behaviour lie in the personality of the bully, personality of the victim, mutual antipathy of the perpetrator and the victim and in the job selection process.

Keywords: School, school climate, aggression, bullying in the workplace, causes of bullying.

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1. Introduction

What is expected from a modern school? What mission should it fulfil? Which factors affect teachers' work? These questions are asked by the authors of the paper, who have been for a long time involved in research on the quality of the school environment, workplace relationships and factors affecting the teaching profession.

The paper is based on the perception of the school as an institution that plays a key role in relation to society by providing education to the adolescent generation, who will in adulthood take responsibility for the functioning of society, its values and development. The provider of education is the teacher, who should have the necessary social prestige and should receive adequate evaluation. Teachers should be provided with adequate working conditions, including supportive management, good cooperation with the families of children and a positive school climate. The latter element is considered one of the key factors affecting the quality and effectiveness of teaching. An adverse school climate affects teacher satisfaction in the workplace, performance and the quality of teaching. One of the risk factors that threatens not only the quality of school climate but also teacher health is mobbing, which a form of workplace is bullying. The authors of the paper attempted to map this issue in Czech elementary schools. For the purposes of the paper, the authors focused on the causes of the phenomenon from the perspective of teachers who had been victims of workplace bullying.

1.1. Literature review

Workplace bullying has become a widely discussed and examined issue lately. The concept of mobbing was first described in 1984 by Leymann (1996) as 'a subtle act of aggression in the workplace; on a daily basis for several months an employee is exposed to hostility from one or more individuals, while experiencing helplessness and fear of being excluded from the group of co-workers'. Leymann (1996) also defined five most frequent mobbing strategies: impossibility to express one's own opinions and to communicate, limited social contacts, threat to the victim's reputation, attacks on the quality of professional and personal life and eventually threat to the victim's health. Mobbing is also associated with intimidation, insulting, belittling and chasing of the victim, giving senseless and difficult tasks, lack of trust and support, slandering and so on (Fox & Stallworth, 2005). Another definition is presented by Einarsen and his colleagues (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf & Cooper, 2011), according to whom this behaviour involves harassment, offending and social exclusion of an employee or negative influencing of the employee's work. An activity can be considered bullying if such behaviour is regular (e.g., once a week) and repeated (e.g., during the past 6 months). During this escalating process, the victim is getting into an inferior or subordinate position and is the target of constant negative activities (Einarsen et al., 2011). Considering the latter definition, there are some features that characterise and distinguish workplace bullying from other forms of violence:

- Undesirable behaviour
- Repeated, long-term hurting
- Asymmetry (Einarsen et al., 2011; Einarsen, Raknes & Matthiesen, 1994).

Taking into account the previous definition, bullying in the workplace is characterised by at least three aspects, which include undesirable behaviour, repeated and regular nature and power imbalance. The first aspect of bullying in the workplace is that the victim of bullying is exposed to direct or indirect behaviour that is highly undesirable. These undesirable forms of unethical behaviour in the workplace may range from very subtle manifestations of negative behaviour to deliberate attacks on an individual (e.g., withholding information that affects the victim's work performance, repeated reminding of errors or excessive supervision). Another sign that differentiates bullying in the workplace from other forms of violence is that bullying in the workplace is not a single attack or incident, but it is repeated and long-term aggressive behaviour directed against one or more persons (Einarsen et al., 1994). This form of undesirable behaviour takes place regularly over a longer period of

time, usually 6 months or 1 year (Einarsen, Matthiesen & Hauge, 2008). This criterion is supported by the argument that bullying in the workplace leads to mental and psychosomatic disorders which can be diagnosed after a period of 6 months, such as the post-traumatic stress disorder (Leymann, 1996). The last feature, which is power asymmetry between the mobber and the victim, manifests as the victim's helplessness to resist, stop or prevent abuse. Power asymmetry very often results from the formal distribution of power in the organisation and also from informal resources, particularly personal contacts.

The above-mentioned knowledge on workplace bullying suggests that this is a form of mental maltreatment with systematic, deliberate and especially repeated attacks on an individual. This form of psycho-terror uses discriminating and degrading approach, excessive criticism, ridicule and minor or major intrigue, which the victim is unable to prevent by means of usual volitional mechanisms. The victim's mental balance is disrupted, which is reflected in work performance and might lead to serious personality integrity disorders in the mental area (depression, concentration disorders, self-doubt, anxiety and even psychiatric syndromes with suicidal thoughts), psychosomatic area (cardiac and blood circulation disorders, astringent breathing, headache, neck pain, back pain, skin diseases and diseases of the gastrointestinal tract), psychosocial area (inability to establish social relationships and ties, isolation, degradation of interpersonal relationships, distrust, disruption of private life and so on) and last but not least in the economic area in the form of decreased work performance, increased morbidity and associated high treatment costs (Cakirpaloglu, Smahaj, Dobesova Cakirpaloglu & Zielina, 2017; Huber, 1995; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2001; Svobodova, 2008). The authors also state that the consequences of mobbing are devastating both for the victims of workplace bullying and the observers. For example, some studies suggest that the witnesses of bullying in the workplace are marked by decreased job satisfaction, lesser efficiency, higher fluctuation and increased mental discomfort; this may even lead to depression (Vartia, 2003). Paradoxically, the consequences are also reflected in the aggressor's personality—fear of being revealed and punished, atypical social ties and dubious pleasure from the suffering of others result in a lack of concentration on work, and their actions lead to a dysfunctional working environment.

Considering the possible causes of mobbing, the primary cause which usually triggers mobbing is conflict. According to Kratz (2005, p. 25), 'conflict results from a tense situation, where two independent parties try to interact in incongruous ways and are aware that they are opponents'. Kelnarova and Matejkova (2010, p. 154) state that even a banal conflict may transform into mobbing; if the situation is not calmed down, unpleasant atmosphere in the workplace grows into bullying.

People encounter conflict on a daily basis. As far as conflicts in the workplace are concerned, the important aspect is how these conflicts are approached and addressed in a self-confident way. If conflicts are resolved in an active way, they might become positive motivation (cf. Fehlau, 2003; Kratz, 2005). Similarly, Cech (2011) believes that mobbing starts in an innocent conflict. Conflicts that are not resolved in a constructive way and are left to escalate become more intense and let mobbing burst in full force. Conflicts cannot be avoided, but it is necessary to deal with them in an active way, address them reasonably and constructively, and thus mitigate their negative implications. If a correct conflict resolution strategy is not applied, the stronger party wins, albeit incorrectly.

However, conflicts are always intensified by a number of supportive factors. Professional publications mention several factors that may determine or cause the development of workplace bullying. These factors are classified into the following two basic groups:

1. Factors related to the working environment.
2. Individual characteristics of victims and aggressors.

In the context of the working environment, one of the triggers is weak corporate leadership, conflicts of roles, inconsistent work supervision (Einarsen et al., 1994); relationships between work content and social environment were also identified as the determinants of a disturbed environment (Zapf, 1999). In his publication, Kemp (2005) describes other characteristics of mobbing, which occur if

allowed by the management; in that case, the workplace has an unhealthy working climate. The results of his research suggest that workplace mobbing is not an individual problem but a problem of the whole culture of the workplace, and mobbing is an imaginary mirror of this culture. If there is a person in the workplace who slanders another employee, such slander would likely cease to exist in a cultural and healthy environment, whereas an unhealthy environment would become a breeding ground. A research study by Shallcross, Ramsay & Sheenan (2008) suggests that strongly feminised working environments are more prone to the development of an unhealthy and uncivilised working environment, and therefore, these environments (e.g., in schools) are more risky in terms of mobbing. Mobbing through slander, gossip and discredit is often aimed at women in middle management positions by women in subordinate positions.

This issue is therefore a serious problem and phenomenon, which includes violation of social norms associated with limiting fundamental human rights with possible tragic consequences for the victim and the victim's personality. Some researchers suggest that the mentioned adverse phenomena occur in schools as well as universities, present a burden for many teachers, and are the cause of not only serious personal problems, but also affect the quality of the teacher's performance including teacher–student relationships (Cech, 2011; Zabrodska & Kveton, 2012).

2. Methodology

The main objective of the research was to perform a qualitative assessment and analysis of the responses of elementary school teachers who have personal experiences with workplace bullying. These content analyses were used to identify the factors causing bullying in the workplace.

2.1. Method

In the present qualitative research, the data collection method was a semi-structured interview. The data collected were processed by means of the embedded theory method with subsequent data decoding for the purposes of data interpretation, conceptualisation and subsequent integration. Three types of coding were used in the context of the embedded theory method—open, axial and selective. The validity of the research was ensured by means of triangulation through multiple-source statements (Gavora, 2010), for example, correspondence, police records, newspaper articles and so on.

2.2. Sample

The research sample consisted of 13 elementary school teachers who had personal experiences with workplace bullying. This was deliberate sampling characterised by the following criteria: regular bullying behaviour by colleagues or superiors, at least once a week for a period of at least 6 months. As already mentioned, this research is a follow-up of a quantitative research on mobbing in elementary schools (Cech, 2011), one of the outcomes of which was identification of teachers as victims of mobbing.

The analysis focused on data excerpts and core statements that contain regularities and repeating statement patterns. In some cases, less frequent categories of statements are analysed, but any such case is duly justified.

Regarding the fact that this is a relatively extensive qualitative research study, only a part of open coding is presented. It should be noted that the victims of bullying are also affected by other intervening variables acting from their external environment, which are not directly related to the bullying behaviour but have a determining or modifying effect on the actions and behaviour of the victim.

3. Results, conclusions and recommendations

In the interviews, the teachers provided detailed descriptions of bullying that they had personally experienced, including specific manifestations and examples. When they reflected on these experiences, they also thought about the causes of this unenviable situation. Many respondents did not understand the motivation of the aggressor and did not know what the mistake was. The causes usually include bad qualities of the aggressor or other aspects of the situation. The factors that cause bullying in the workplace as described by the teachers are summarised in Figure 1 and described in detail below. These include factors on the part of the aggressor, qualities of the victim, mutual antipathy and job selection process. Regarding the fact that bullying is a very complex social phenomenon, the causes cannot be considered separately, but multifactorial causation needs to be considered.
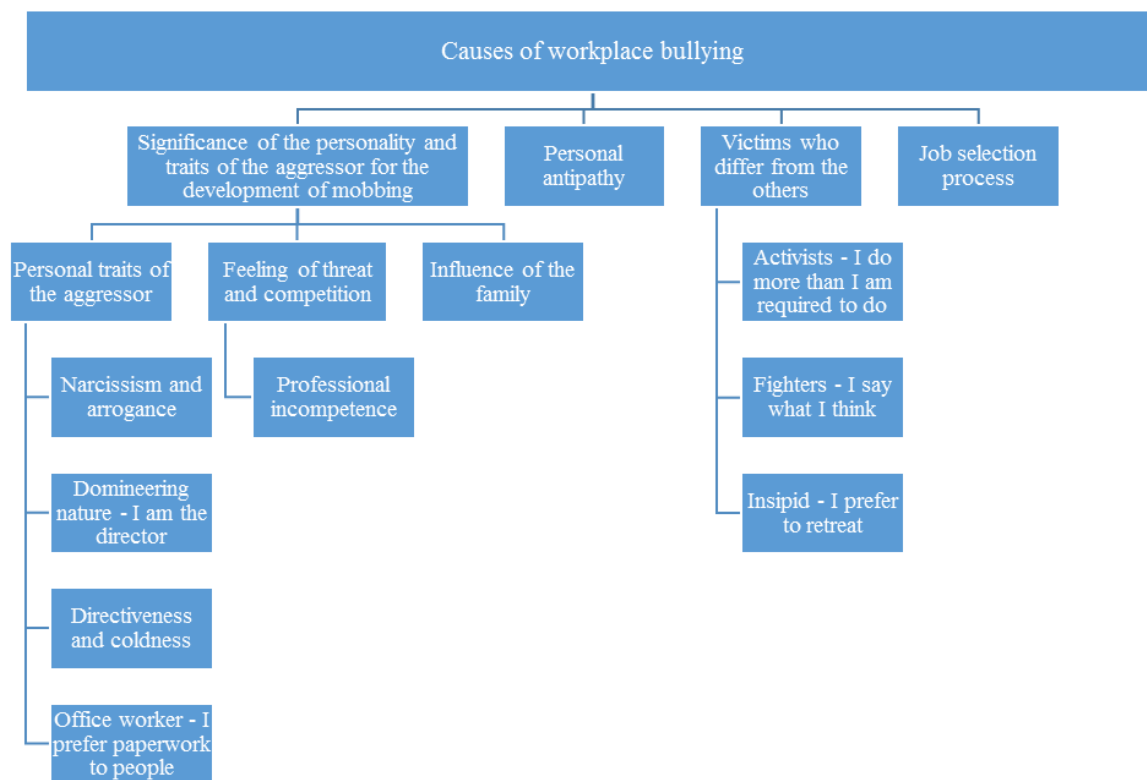
Figure 1. Causes of workplace bullying

3.1. Analysis of categories and subcategories

3.1.1. Significance of the personality and manifestations of the aggressor for the development of mobbing

A large number of detailed responses concerned bad qualities and profile of the aggressor, which they believed were essential. Other factors would not have, by themselves, caused bullying but were supportive in combination with the dominant personality of the aggressor. The respondents described unhealthy or even pathological behaviour of the aggressor, his/her personality traits and family background, which affected the aggressor's behaviour.

Personality traits of the aggressor

The interviews suggested that personality traits of the aggressor represented the most serious cause of mobbing. According to the teachers, the behaviour of the aggressor was not normal and differed from other people's behaviour. Going far beyond of 'what is normal' and a noticeable

agreement in the descriptions provided by the victims' points to some characteristics that can be considered high-risk aspects in terms of workplace bullying. These characteristics include narcissism and related traits such as arrogance and egocentrism, domineering nature and desire for power, directiveness, coldness, and preferring paperwork to people and children.

- *Narcissism and arrogance*

Narcissism is excessive admiration of one's own attributes, accompanied by arrogant behaviour, lack of understanding for other people, who are considered mere instruments to achieve one's own goals. From a psychological perspective, this is a personality disorder described by excessive admiration for oneself, where such admiration is also required from other people who the narcissist tries to control and use, envies other people's success and so on (Cakirpaloglu, 2012; Prasko, 2009). This description very aptly summarises the personality traits described in the interviews. The respondents jointly described strong egocentrism of the aggressor, seeing oneself as perfect without admitting any mistakes.

- *Domineering nature—I am the director*

Prekopova (2000, p. 15) states that 'what we identify as domineering nature does not match one's effort to succeed or narcissism'. For this reason, and especially regarding the respondents' emphasis on this characteristic, domineering nature has a separate sub-chapter. One of the main features of domineering nature, as suggested for the aggressors, is an extreme desire for power, adherence to power and abusing power.

Power also means that there is someone subordinate, and in the event of domineering nature this also includes humiliation. The domineering tendencies of the aggressor are evident in the respondents' statements which often mention the aggressor's constant need to 'walk all over someone'. This feature is also evident in other categories, which suggest a high level of employee fluctuation (firing, gradual disposal of employees) and does not support the school atmosphere. Although employees change, the problems remain, suggesting that the cause is on the part of the aggressor.

- *Office worker—I prefer paperwork to people*

All interviews mentioned another significant characteristic of the aggressor: 'office work, paperwork and a remote relationship with other people and the profession'. The teachers agree that their superior or colleague had a very good attitude to formal matters, paperwork and so on. Most of the respondents speak with praise of the aggressors and believe that they are the right persons for the job concerning their meticulousness in this area. The aggressors had everything in order in terms of economic matters and documents, which resulted in a positive assessment of the school inspectorate and the school authority. Apart from careful paperwork and filling out forms, this 'office' attitude was accompanied by formal behaviour, as agreed by the teachers.

The aspect of 'office work' was assessed positively by the respondents. They know that this is a necessary component of a superior position. But overall, this characteristic was assessed as insufficient because office work was considered in sharp contrast with the aggressor's attitude to employees, children, and the main mission of the school—high-quality teaching. The respondents considered these factors the cornerstone of professionalism and qualification, which implies that the aggressor was considered by most of the respondents as a poor-quality teacher.

Feeling of threat and competition

Another significant cause of bullying in the workplace, as indicated by the respondents in addition to personality traits, was a feeling of threat and competition on the part of the aggressor. According to the teachers, the aggressor was afraid of being unseated, removed from function and criticised, which would jeopardise the aggressor's power. In the event that the aggressor felt threatened, the teachers suggested they did not have aspirations to take the position, but some suggested this might happen in the future. In the case of mobbing, the fear of losing the position was justified because according to the respondents, the insufficient qualification of the aggressor could result in losing the function in the long term.

- *Professional incompetence*

The feeling of competition on the part of the aggressor is probably based on the person's fear that someone could be better. The teachers' statements clearly show that the person's attitude to employees and colleagues, children or the teaching process does not match their opinion about expertise and professionalism. They also described the aggressor' lack of interest in working with children and a poor attitude to teaching and problem solving. Many of the respondents agree that the aggressor was not a good teacher or educational professional.

Family effect on the aggressor's personality

In addition to other unique characteristics suggested by the respondents in relation to the aggressor, the respondents also mentioned the effect of the family on the personality of the aggressor. This subcategory is based on the following question: Why does the aggressor behave like this? What makes the aggressor act in this way? The answers of three respondents to this question suggest the effect of the family, which accepts selfish and aggressive behaviour, that is, learned behaviour. This idea was suggested only by a few respondents, but it would be interesting to find out whether selfish and aggressive behaviour is present in other social groups, what its history is, and whether this phenomenon is generalisable.

3.1.2. Personal antipathy

The main cause of workplace bullying as suggested by the teachers often includes personal antipathy between them and the aggressor. The descriptions include disliking and different personalities, which may have a significant effect on personal relationships. However, due to the fact that in most cases the aggressor was the headteacher, the respondents maintained respect, which in many of the respondents disappeared much later. According to the teachers, antipathy is one of the causes of workplace bullying.

3.1.3. Victims who differ from the others

The first impression of the interviews was that the victims (respondents) were normal teachers who did not differ from other people in any way. However, detailed coding resulted in three subcategories according to more specific traits of the victims. These categories are not the direct cause of bullying. These are rather positive or neutral qualities of the victim's behaviour, but when faced with the aggressor, they may be the reason why these teachers are the victims. In other words, this is the reason why aggression was aimed at these persons. The subcategories include 'Activists', 'Fighters' and 'Insipid'. What often happens is that these three categories, especially 'Activists' and 'Fighters' overlap.

Activists–I do more than I am required to do

Some respondents wondered why they became the target of continuous monitoring, humiliation, bullying, mostly by the management, and especially after they had done so much extra work for their school: projects, clubs, sports activities, competitions and so on. But perhaps these activities made the aggressor feel threatened or diverted attention elsewhere than on the aggressor. It cannot be positively stated whether this was a deliberate action by the aggressor, but it is likely regarding the number of responses in this category.

Fighters—I say what I think

Compared with activists, a much greater threat for the aggressor is posed by fighters. It is because they aim their activity directly at the aggressor. They are often self-confident and are not afraid to say what they think and do not hesitate to communicate the aspects that affect them or that they consider unfair to a colleague or the superior. According to the respondents, the aggressor is unable to accept such criticism, this also applies to careful feedback or suggestions made by other people. Regarding the traits described above (narcissism, domineering nature), this behaviour is perceived by the aggressor as directly threatening their identity and position; they are unable to respond

adequately. As a result, usual assertiveness, deliberate engagement in the work process, and a proactive attitude are considered by the aggressor as a dangerous act of hostility.

Insipid—I prefer to retreat

A few interviews suggested that some victims became the target due to their non-confrontational nature. This was indicated by a very small number of respondents who described themselves as having this quality, and some described in this way their colleagues who became the victims of bullying. These traits were described as retreating from the aggressor, lacking defence or lacking a desire to become part of the team.

3.1.4. Job selection process

In addition to the aggressor's qualities, characteristic of the victim and mutual antipathy, some teachers believe that the cause of bossing lies in the job selection process that the headteacher had to undergo. They believe that there was nobody to choose from in the selection process because all applicants were aggressors. As the teachers frequently mentioned, these incompetent persons became the leading employees controlling a number of people and processes. In addition to the job selection process, another aspect could be the selection of the headteacher (aggressor) from among the teaching staff. For many, the bossing person was originally their colleague.

4. Conclusion

Bullying in the workplace is a complex phenomenon, which, if developed, affects the whole personality of the victim, including health, mental condition, private life, work, ideals and opportunities. The core of bullying is humiliation and degradation of personality. The victim is often under constant and long-term pressure; bullying can also affect the victim's environment and eventually the victim has no one in support. Some conditions in the educational system are ruthless and it is difficult for teachers to find a way out or to defend themselves. To conclude, it is obvious that bullying in the workplace is a serious ethical issue, which affects the life of current schools and significantly influences the personality of the teacher-victim and the teacher's work performance and private life. The research suggests that the teachers who experienced bullying in the role of victims state that the main reasons for this kind of aggressive behaviour lie in the personality of the bully, personality of the victim, mutual antipathy of the perpetrator and the victim and job selection process.

Having stated this, the issue is surely not resolved. For the purposes of prevention, it is recommended to increase the teachers' awareness not only in terms of the phenomenon itself but also mainly in terms of defence mechanisms and knowledge of legal norms. Therefore, the authors of the present paper believe that it is necessary to investigate this phenomenon, inform about the results and implement them into the curricula of undergraduate teacher training. At the same time, each school should adopt an ethical code for teachers and acknowledge mobbing as an unacceptable form of behaviour in the school environment.

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