

The Early Stages of Workplace Bullying and How It Becomes Prolonged: The Role of Culture in Predicting Target Responses

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Abstract The extant workplace bullying literature has largely overlooked the potential role of culture. Drawing on cognitive consistency theory, culture's influence on targets' reactions toward subtle forms of bullying during its early stages is theorized. This theoretical analysis proposes that employees high in individualism and low in power distance are more likely to engage in resistance-based responses toward subtle acts of bullying than employees high in collectivism and power distance, respectively. Targets' resistance-based responses, which are also influenced by learned helplessness deficits, along with perpetrator revenge behaviors, influence whether bullying becomes prolonged. A number of testable propositions are offered based on the conceptual model presented. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed and avenues for future research are offered.

Keywords Workplace bullying · Bullying responses · Culture · Subtle bullying

Introduction

Bullying in the workplace has been an ethical phenomenon for as long as there have been formal organizations and there is no reason to believe that the intensity of this deviant behavior will diminish. In fact, just the opposite is expected, given the growth of global organizations...Cultural foundations play an important part in the level and types of causes, as

well as, the resolution to bullying acts in global organizations (Harvey et al. 2009, p. 36).

Over the past two decades, workplace bullying has received growing scholarly attention. Researchers have found that workplace bullying is prevalent in several countries, including the United States (Lutgen-Sandvik et al. 2007), the United Kingdom (Liefoghe and Davey 2001), Canada (Leck and Galperin 2006), Norway (Einarsen et al. 1994), Italy (Giorgi et al. 2011), Japan (Meek 2004), and others. While the prevalence of workplace bullying generally ranges from five to ten percent in Europe, researchers reporting the prevalence rate in the US found that ~47 % of employees had been bullied over the past 2 years (Lutgen-Sandvik et al. 2007). Moreover, other US-based estimates have reported that ~97 % of employees have experienced some form of bullying in the workplace over the past 5 years (Fox and Stallworth 2005). Thus, workplace bullying is a prevalent phenomenon in organizations and further research is needed to understand how it unfolds (Sidle 2010). Increasingly, this research of workplace bullying has been undertaken within the field of business ethics (Boddy 2011; Bulutlar and Unler Oz 2009; Harvey et al. 2006; Mathisen et al. 2011; Soyly 2011; Stouten et al. 2010).

Stone-Romero et al. (2003, p. 330) contend that culture has been “largely ignored” in the field of organizational behavior. This absence of culture research has similarly been reflected in the workplace bullying literature. Indeed, Loh et al. (2010, p. 236) recently contended that “cross-cultural examinations of workplace bullying have been rare”. Furthermore, Sidle adds that “research on bullying is needed, both across cultures and in multicultural work settings. After all, managers and employees are increasingly spending time collaborating in diverse, global work

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environments—where key differences in values, perceptions, and belief systems nonetheless exist” (2010, p. 101). Finally, Gibson and Callister (2010, p. 84) also recently suggested that “cultural dimension research may be useful in stimulating future research on anger and culture”. To address this critical research void, the potential influences of cultural differences in the context of workplace bullying, using Hofstede’s (1980) cultural dimensions typology, will be investigated through a theory-driven analysis. More specifically, this article will explore the role of culture in predicting targets’ reactions to subtle forms of bullying during its early stages. Following this, the implications of target reactions are then explored and theorized.

Given researchers’ calls for investigation of workplace bullying from a cross-cultural perspective (e.g., Hoel et al. 1999; Loh et al. 2010; Lutgen-Sandvik et al. 2007; Power et al. 2011, Sidle 2010) and the applicability of Hofstede’s (1980) cultural dimensions, I use two dimensions from this framework (individualism vs. collectivism and power distance) as a base for the analysis. With the intensification of globalization, managers face an increasingly cross-cultural workforce wherein single organizations consist of multiple employees from different cultural backgrounds (Ma and Allen 2009). In other words, it is not uncommon for an employee in one cubicle to be highly individualistic, while an employee in the next cubicle is highly collectivistic (Stone-Romero et al. 2003). Consequently, this suggests that there can be considerable merit in examining cultural dimensions at the individual level (see Kirkman et al. 2006).

In this article, I first provide an overview of workplace bullying and its conceptualizations in the literature. Second, I discuss Hofstede’s (1980) cultural dimensions typology and cross-cultural research related to workplace bullying. Third, I examine how individualism versus collectivism and power distance can influence targets’ reactions to subtle bullying behaviors, while outlining the critical roles of learned helplessness and perpetrator revenge behaviors in the process of bullying becoming prolonged. Based on this analysis, several research propositions are developed. Finally, theoretical and practical implications are highlighted and avenues for future research are offered.

Workplace Bullying

Workplace Bullying: An Overview

The following definition has been commonly used in the workplace bullying literature (Einarsen et al. 2003, p. 15):

Bullying at work means harassing, offending, socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone’s

work tasks. In order for the label bullying (or mobbing) to be applied to a particular activity, interaction or process it has to occur repeatedly and regularly (e.g., weekly) and over a period of time (e.g., about six months). Bullying is an escalated process in the course of which the person confronted ends up in an inferior position and becomes the target of systematic negative social acts.

This definition above illuminates four broad features. Behaviors must be *frequent*, *persistent*, *reflect power disparities* (not necessarily hierarchical), and be *systematic* to be labeled bullying. Moreover, this definition has been applied by researchers across cultures ranging from Canada and the USA (Lutgen-Sandvik et al. 2007) to widely across Europe (Einarsen et al. 2003; Giorgi 2010). Over 20 years ago, Leymann’s (1990) pioneering research drew similarities between bullying that he had observed in his research on childhood bullying with bullying behaviors in adults. Subsequently, Einarsen et al. (1994) found that bullying is indeed prevalent in organizations, which prompted a proliferation of research on this phenomenon (Boddy 2011; Skogstad et al. 2011; Van de Vliert 2011).

When examining antecedents of workplace bullying, researchers have investigated the relationship between several dispositional, demographic, and climate-related factors such as personality (Glaso et al. 2007; Persson et al. 2009), age (Vartia 1996), gender (Lewis and Gunn 2007; Leymann 1996), race/ethnicity (Fox and Stallworth 2005), and ethical climate (Bulutlar and Unler Oz 2009) with being a target of workplace bullying. The term “target” is used to refer to employees who have been subjected to bullying behaviors from another employee, who may be a supervisor/manager, peer, or subordinate. With the exception of race/ethnicity and neuroticism, researchers have reported conflicting findings for dispositional and demographic variables (Aquino and Thau 2009; Hoel et al. 1999). As mentioned, culture has received scant attention, while representing an important and relevant set of values, beliefs, and attitudes that may help predict targets’ interpretation and reactions to workplace bullying. Therefore, a theory-driven analysis of culture focused on how relational cultural dimensions can predict targets’ responses to workplace bullying can be particularly insightful for researchers.

Workplace Bullying Conceptualizations

Workplace bullying ranges from behaviors that are fairly subtle (e.g., excessive workloads, persistent monitoring of work, personal jokes, gossip) to those that are explicit and identifiable (e.g., violence, aggression, insults, threats) (Parzefall and Salin 2010; Stouten et al. 2010). Studies

have revealed that the most common and prevalent forms of workplace bullying are those that are relatively subtle (e.g., Fox and Stallworth 2005; Lutgen-Sandvik et al. 2007). This is particularly important because these subtle forms of workplace bullying are often *difficult to recognize* as bullying for both targets and witnesses (Hoel et al. 2010). Essentially, the perpetrator can bully through behaviors that (1) are difficult to recognize and (2) can be justified and rationalized to others (e.g., attempting to increase the target's productivity through higher workloads or monitoring).

Hoel and Beale (2006, p. 242) similarly contended based on their research, "The presence of bullying behavior may exist independently of how these behaviors are being interpreted and construed". Essentially, targets who are being bullied may not find the perpetrator's behavior to be unacceptable because of uncertainty regarding the perpetrator's intentionality (Liefoghe and Davey 2001). In other words, targets may be reluctant to ascribe negative intentions to the perpetrator because he/she may be uncertain whether the excessive workloads, high levels of monitoring, persistent criticism of work, or personal jokes are in fact intended to be harmful (Baillien et al. 2009). This is particularly important in the context of culture. For example, employees who have high power distance may be less likely to recognize the negative intent inherent in bullying behaviors when these behaviors are perpetrated by a supervisor or manager. This is because employees who have high power distance perceive a wider range of behaviors as legitimate within the authority of a supervisor than those who have low power distance (Hofstede 1980).

Bullying can be described as a *process* that often intensifies over time (Einarsen et al. 2003). As a result, the theoretical analysis in this article captures the role of early stages of bullying and its effects on causing prolonged bullying. While negative behaviors must persist over at least 6 months to be labeled bullying, prolonged bullying simply refers to negative behaviors that continue beyond the early stages (e.g., first 6 months to 1 year) to persist over the longer term (e.g., perhaps for several years). To date, the measurement of bullying as a process has received little to no attention. More specifically, the differentiation of bullying between the early stages and later stages has not been examined. To illustrate, common scales used to measure workplace bullying do not include an item that requests respondents to indicate how long they have experienced these behaviors. Moreover, longitudinal research designs examining workplace bullying have been sparse (Parzefall and Salin 2010). Thus, the use of terms in this theoretical article such as "early recognition" and "prolonged bullying" are exploratory. It is hoped that this research will stimulate further studies that investigate bullying as a process. Indeed, identifying early stage

interventions can help counteract bullying behaviors in organizations; thus, such research can be critical to the field.

When considering the importance of perceptions, culture represents an important potential predictor. Culture may represent a key construct in the context of targets' perceptions because of the way in which values can shape perceptions (Hofstede 1980; Kirkman et al. 2006). Moreover, targets' perceptions of bullying will be tied to how they may react toward the perpetrator. Finally, subtle bullying behaviors represent the focus of this analysis. Subtle forms of bullying (e.g., withholding information, excessive workloads, persistent criticism) are more likely than overt forms (e.g., threats, harsh insults, violence) to be interpreted in a variety of ways (Baillien et al. 2009; Liefoghe and Davey 2001). These interpretations will tend to influence how employees react toward the bullying (Liefoghe and Davey 2001). Perhaps because of this reason, subtle forms of bullying are more common in organizations (Fox and Stallworth 2005). Before tying culture to target reactions, Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions are introduced.

Cultural Dimensions

Over 30 years ago, Hofstede (1980) published a groundbreaking study in the area of national culture that propelled the field. While several researchers have introduced varying typologies of cultural dimensions (e.g., House et al. 2004; Trompenaars 1993), Hofstede's framework has been the most influential in the field (for a review, see Kirkman et al. 2006). Hofstede's framework identified broad cultural dimensions which can be used to differentiate national values, beliefs, and attitudes. Moreover, these values become ingrained in individuals and are transmitted across generations to preserve them as a way of life (Matsumoto et al. 2008). Finally, with the workplace becoming increasingly diverse and employees increasingly mobile, considering the role of cultural differences *within* organizations has become critical (Kirkman et al. 2006).

Hofstede (1980) originally identified four dimensions of culture. First, he found that countries varied in the degree to which its residents were individualistic versus collectivistic. Individualistic people are those who care primarily for themselves and their immediate families, while collectivistic people are those who have a larger in-group to which they are loyal and expect loyalty in return. Second, he found that countries varied in the extent to which individuals accepted power distance as legitimate within institutions. Power distance varies from high to low and can be defined as the degree to which individuals accept power imbalances as legitimate within institutions and

organizations. Third, he found that countries varied in the degree to which its residents are masculine versus feminine. Masculinity includes characteristics and traits such as assertiveness and being uncaring toward others, while femininity can be defined as the opposite (i.e., unassertive and caring). Within this dimension, the “tough” versus “tender” aspects are often highlighted. Fourth, he found that countries varied in the degree to which they prefer to avoid uncertainty. Uncertainty avoidance refers to the extent to which individuals feel threatened by ambiguous and uncertain situations and, in turn, attempt to avoid such situations. In addition, a fifth dimension, long-term outlook/orientation, was later added suggesting that countries vary in whether they have a long- versus short-term orientation.

While researchers have found that culture is related to decision making (e.g., Mitchell et al. 2000), leadership behaviors (Chan and Drasgow 2001), and work outcomes such as job performance (Farh et al. 2007), there has been particularly limited research on the relationship between culture and workplace bullying. Moreover, while Loh et al.’s (2010) recent study was the first to examine workplace bullying and cultural values, their analysis focused on national differences (Australia vs. Singapore) and only investigated power distance. Furthermore, their analysis specifically investigated the influence of culture on targeted employees’ outcomes, such as workgroup identification and job satisfaction. This article builds on and extends Loh et al.’s (2010) study by theorizing the relationship between workplace bullying and two of the cultural dimensions identified by Hofstede (individualism vs. collectivism and power distance). Moreover, this article explores the role of culture in explaining targets’ responses to bullying behaviors.

Stone-Romero et al. (2003) theorized the potential for greater interpersonal conflict between employees of different cultures as a result of varying role scripts and role expectations. While this article does not focus on bullying behaviors that are specifically engaged in because of cultural differences, Stone-Romero et al.’s (2003) analysis demonstrates the strong potential for interpersonal conflict within a cross-cultural context. In this article, the influence of culture as an antecedent to employees’ reactions to bullying is explored, representing the *first* attempt to theoretically or empirically analyze this research question.

Only individualism versus collectivism and power distance are theorized with workplace bullying. These two are specifically posited because of their relational nature, which differentiates these two dimensions from Hofstede’s other three dimensions (masculinity vs. femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and time orientation) (Kirkman et al. 2006). While other dimensions may have certain implications for relationships, such as employees with high

femininity valuing positive interpersonal relationships (Einarsen 2000; Matsumoto et al. 2008), these latter three dimensions are not inherently based on interpersonal relations. Alternatively, individualism versus collectivism and power distance are dimensions that are specifically based on how individuals believe they should relate to others. For example, collectivism specifically explicates the relation between one team member and another (e.g., team-based attitudes), while power distance explicates the relation between employees at different hierarchical levels. Because workplace bullying is an interpersonal phenomenon, these two relational-based dimensions represent strong bases upon which workplace bullying can be theorized with culture.

Theoretical Development

In this section, culture’s potential for predicting an employee’s responses to workplace bullying and, in turn, experiencing prolonged bullying is explored. Second, perpetrator revenge behavior is proposed as a key moderator to the relationship between resistance-based responses and prolonged bullying experiences. Moreover, the model (Fig. 1) depicts the relationship between these factors. In brief, employees with high levels of individualism and low power distance will be more likely to engage in resistance-based responses toward the perpetrator of the bullying. High levels of learned helplessness can, however, reduce the likelihood of employees forming resistance-based responses. Moreover, these reactions will be successful in halting bullying when the perpetrator’s revenge behaviors are low. Perpetrator revenge behaviors will be shaped by perceived support from HRM, perceived support from peers, threats of escalation, and revenge cognitions. When perpetrator revenge behaviors are low, employees who engage in resistance-based behaviors will be less likely to experience prolonged bullying because of the higher perceived costs of engaging in bullying on the part of the perpetrator (Leck and Galperin 2006). To help explain how cultural values can shape employees’ reactions toward bullying behaviors, cognitive consistency theory and enacting behaviors are discussed. These are important frameworks for explaining employees’ ability to manipulate interpretations of experienced behaviors to achieve cognitive consistency.

Early Stages of Workplace Bullying and Enactment Behaviors

According to cognitive consistency theory (Festinger 1957), individuals seek consistency between their opinions, beliefs, and values on the one hand, and behaviors

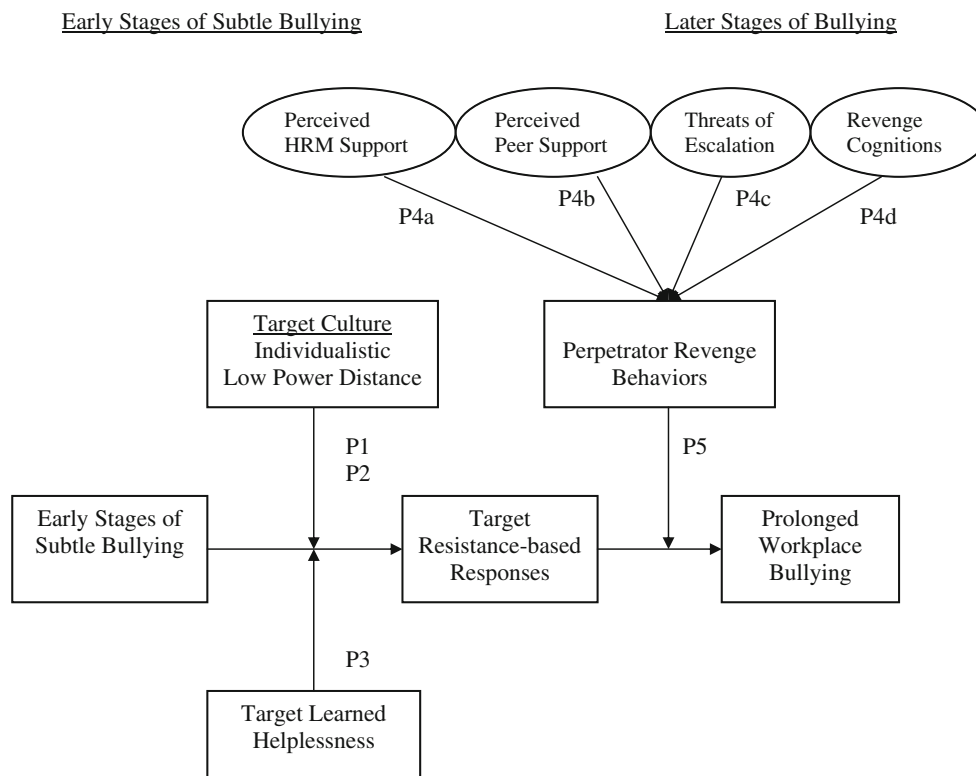


Fig. 1 The role of culture in explaining target responses

(engaged in or observed) on the other (Maertz et al. 2009). Furthermore, when there is inconsistency between one's values and the behaviors that an individual observes, he/she will tend to feel a sense of discomfort. To ease this discomfort, individuals may attempt to seek alignment between their values and the behaviors observed (Maertz et al. 2009). While this alignment can take the form of changing one's values to match the behaviors observed (Festinger 1957), *values* can be particularly difficult to alter. Indeed, cultural values are suggested to be inherent to one's beliefs and identity (Kirkman et al. 2006). Therefore, employees may find other ways by which to align their values with the behaviors observed. One way in which employees may accomplish this is through environment enactment (Weick 1995). More specifically, employees can manipulate their interpretations and perceptions of behaviors observed by cognitively restructuring features of their environment (Weick 1995). This would allow their perceptions of the behaviors to be more closely aligned with their own cultural values and expectations (Maitlis and Sonenshein 2010).

Environment enactment suggests that interpretations are malleable and that individuals are able to internally reconstruct and reinterpret events through a process of rationalization. A key motive underlying the reconstruction of events is the desire to achieve cognitive consistency.

To illustrate, studies on the normalization of corruption describe how employees can rationalize behaviors as normal rather than corrupt (e.g., Anand et al. 2004), which lends support to the possible manipulation of interpretations. Hence, when employees view corrupt behaviors in the workplace (e.g., fraud), they are able to re-construct their interpretation of the event to rationalize such behaviors as normal. This rationalization and environment enactment by employees was found in organizations such as Enron, Tyco, and Parmalat (Anand et al. 2004).

Applying this concept in the context of workplace bullying, employees with certain cultural values may reconstruct and reinterpret bullying behaviors to being necessary, or even normal. This is often done by ascribing alternative motives to the perpetrator (Anand et al. 2004); in this case, rationalizing that the perpetrator's motive is not to harm. For instance, collectivistic employees may reinterpret and reconstruct personal jokes, excessive workloads, or high levels of monitoring to be in the best interests of the team and as a necessary sacrifice for team cohesion and performance. This will be described in greater detail below. Moreover, interpretations may be more easily manipulated when the bullying behaviors experienced are subtle (Hoel and Beale 2006), which represents the focus of this analysis. These interpretations may then shape how employees respond to bullying behaviors.

Early Bullying and Resistance-Based Responses

Resistance-based responses is a broad term used to describe a wide range of active reactions by the target, which can include the demonstration of displeasure through non-verbal (e.g., facial expressions), verbal, and/or physical reactions toward the perpetrator. More specifically, two major forms of responses are posited: (1) no response or (2) resistance-based responses (Leck and Galperin 2006). Leck and Galperin (2006), through quantitative and qualitative analysis, found a number of possible responses, which can be sorted into the two categories above. No response can include: stay away from work; keep quiet; laugh it off; avoid place where bullying occurs; and do nothing. Alternatively, resistance-based responses can include: retaliate; make threats to quit; find others to gather evidence; say actions will not be tolerated; go see a lawyer; discuss it with colleagues (to form peer-based alliances); fight back; discuss it with HR department. Two important moderators are proposed to help predict those employees who would be more likely to engage in resistance-based responses against the perpetrator: culture (individualism and power distance) and learned helplessness.

Early Bullying and Resistance-Based Responses: Individualism Versus Collectivism

Individualistic employees focus strongly on their own individual goals and behave in a way that promotes their own best interests rather than the best interests of others (Kirkman et al. 2006). In other words, they are concerned most about individual rewards and success, even if these come at the expense of group goals and success (Dorfman and Howell 1988). Hence, an employee who is the target of behaviors that impede his/her own individual goals will be more likely to become attentive to, and reflect on, such behaviors. This is because such behaviors conflict with their ability to achieve their own goals. Consequently, upon increased attention and reflection, individualistic employees will more likely recognize these behaviors as negative (e.g., bullying) because these behaviors will more quickly trigger thoughts about its conflicting nature with personal success. Moreover, once this disconnect is realized, bullying behaviors will become more salient for an individualistic employee because these behaviors would stand out from those that complement his/her goals (see Fiske and Taylor 1991). For instance, an individualistic employee will likely be more attentive to, and displeased with, others taking credit for his/her work (bullying behavior measured in the NAQ scale; Lutgen-Sandvik et al. 2007) than a collectivistic employee, who will tend to be more concerned with whether the team objective has been met. Similarly, an individualistic employee will be more

displeased with excessive workloads (from NAQ scale) when these result in him/her working extra hours with no perceived individual benefits in sight. While, in contrast, a collectivistic employee may be more likely than an individualistic employee to view and rationalize his/her extra workloads as a sacrifice for team success.

An important consideration about individualistic employees is the importance of self and those very close to him/her (i.e., immediate family) (Hofstede 1980). While individualistic employees view self-interest-based behaviors in the workplace as legitimate (Kirkman et al. 2006), they also continuously refer back to their own individual goals and interests (Earley and Gibson 1998). To illustrate, individualistic employees may view several bullying behaviors such as withholding critical information from others, taking credit for others' work, and criticism of a colleague as legitimate practices when they themselves engage in them or when they view a colleague target another coworker with such behaviors (Lutgen-Sandvik et al. 2007). However, they will be less likely to view these practices as legitimate when others use these behaviors to target them specifically because of the adverse implications for their own personal goals. Hence, employees will more likely resort to actions that protect their own individual interests, which can include resistance-based behaviors to stop the perpetrator.

Conversely, collectivistic employees tend to demonstrate "absolute loyalty" toward their in-group members (Hofstede 1980, p. 45). While collectivistic employees may be more displeased with bullying behaviors that they feel disrupt or risk collective goals, they may be less likely to initially recognize the negative intentions inherent in these behaviors. To explain, from a cognitive perspective, collectivistic employees often assume that team members also behave in a collectivistic way (Earley and Gibson 1998). Thus, when making such assumptions, they will be hesitant to negatively react toward others particularly when the behaviors are *subtle, difficult to recognize*, and can be *interpreted in various ways* (Andersson and Pearson 1999; Hoel and Beale 2006).

Hence, collectivistic employees are more likely to engage in enactment behaviors whereby they manipulate their own interpretations of the behaviors received or observed (Maitlis and Sonenshein 2010). For instance, to gain cognitive consistency with their own values, these employees will manipulate their own interpretations such that excessive workloads and monitoring from a supervisor are rationalized to be in the best interests of the team/organization and its performance. Alternatively, personal jokes from peers may be interpreted as harmless and bringing the team closer together. However, an individualistic employee will be less willing to take personal jokes at his/her own expense, despite the possibility that it may bring the team closer together.

In contrast to the individualistic employee, a collectivistic employee's frame of reference is the team (Hofstede 1980). Collectivistic employees will be less likely to expect that team members will engage in bullying behaviors. Moreover, while overt bullying behaviors (e.g., violence, threats, shouting) may elicit different reactions from collectivistic employees because such behaviors would be seen to violate group norms, the focus of this article is on bullying behaviors that are comparatively subtle. These behaviors tend to be difficult to identify and ambiguous (Hoel and Beale 2006; Hoel et al. 2010). Furthermore, collectivistic employees will tend to "take one for the team" (Hofstede 1980), particularly when these behaviors are subtle because they will not want to risk being labeled the one who disrupted team cohesion and performance (Kirkman et al. 2006). Rather than viewing such behaviors as negative, collectivistic employees will attempt to maintain a team attitude and view such behaviors as an aspect of team membership despite the personal implications (Earley and Gibson 1998). Indeed, resistance-based behaviors such as retaliation may often be viewed as a selfish behavior (Earley and Gibson 1998). Instead, collectivistic employees may turn to possible adaptive forms of group coping, whereby collective coping strategies are adopted (Giorgi et al. 2011). Particularly when the bullying behaviors are subtle, collectivistic employees will have greater reluctance to engage in resistance-based behaviors that could potentially further disrupt team cohesion. Finally, while several researchers have found that bullying behaviors may be difficult to identify for the target (e.g., Baillien et al. 2009; D'Cruz and Noronha 2010; Liefooghe and Davey 2001; Lutgen-Sandvik et al. 2007), bullying may be even more difficult to identify for third parties such as other team members (D'Cruz and Noronha 2011; Einarson et al. 2003). Hence, similar to the many cases in which employees fear that others will not believe them about being bullied (Tracy et al. 2006), collectivistic employees may be more likely to stay quiet about bullying when they are targeted for fears that others will view them as being more concerned about their own goals. Moreover, because cross-cultural differences in single settings are conceptualized, collectivistic employees may further be uncertain about how others will interpret their complaints (Stone-Romero et al. 2003). This will make them less likely to form resistance-based responses to the bullying than individualistic employees.

Proposition 1 *Individualism will moderate the relationship between early bullying and resistance-based behaviors, whereby targets with high individualism will be more likely to engage in resistance-based behaviors than targets with high collectivism.*

Early Bullying and Resistance-Based Responses: Power Distance

Individuals who have high power distance accept greater levels of power from their supervisor and others who are above them in the organizational hierarchy as legitimate (Farh et al. 2007). Moreover, the higher employees are on the dimension of power distance, the more they perceive their supervisor's authority and power over them as legitimate (Hofstede 1980). Employees who have high power distance also value obedience and conformity (Johnson et al. 2005). Furthermore, this applies to the types of demands made by a supervisor (Loh et al. 2010). For instance, employees who have high power distance would be more likely to accept tasks that fall outside their job description and/or that they are overqualified for (e.g., getting a coffee for one's supervisor) than employees who have low power distance (Stone-Romero et al. 2003).

In contrast, an employee who has low power distance accepts and perceives as legitimate a narrower gap of power between individuals at different levels in the hierarchy (Kirkman and Shapiro 2001). Rather than conformity and obedience, employees who have low power distance value independence (Johnson et al. 2005). Hence, an employee who has low power distance would be more likely to reflect upon tasks that he/she receives from a supervisor and assess whether those tasks can be legitimately requested within the supervisor's perceived authority. Moreover, this constant reflection will make an employee with low power distance more likely to recognize negative behaviors and abuses of power by a supervisor when these occur (Lutgen-Sandvik et al. 2007). Supervisor behaviors that demonstrate strong power disparities and conflict with a low power distance subordinate's independence will tend to elicit stronger negative emotions from the subordinate. Indeed, low power distance employees have been found to react more negatively toward authorities when they perceive that they have been treated unfairly (James 1992). These negative reactions can quite reasonably represent resistance-based forms of behaviors toward the perpetrator.

An employee who has high power distance will be more likely to perceive practices that constitute an abuse of power as legitimate and within the supervisor's level of authority (Loh et al. 2010). In other words, he/she would more likely believe that the supervisor, because of his/her authority and level within the organizational hierarchy, has significant authority in determining the tasks that can be reasonably requested of subordinates (Kirkman et al. 2006). Indeed, employees high in power distance have been found to have higher levels of commitment and deference toward their supervisor (Clugston et al. 2000). Thus,

high power distance employees will defer more strongly to their supervisor (Loh et al. 2010).

Finally, because workplace bullying acts are most commonly carried out in a subtle manner such as work overload, criticism of work, and excessive monitoring of work (Fox and Stallworth 2005), there is significant room for misinterpretation on the part of the targeted employee as empirical research on workplace bullying has revealed (e.g., Baillien et al. 2009; D'Cruz and Noronha 2010; Lutgen-Sandvik et al. 2007). Therefore, employees who have high power distance will more likely misinterpret bullying acts as legitimate forms of behavior because of the power they ascribe to their supervisor. Moreover, in their attempt to possess cognitive consistency, employees high in power distance would engage in enactment behaviors to align their interpretations of behaviors engaged in by the supervisor to be consistent with his/her power and authority in the organization. These manipulated interpretations will make high power distance employees less likely to resist subtle bullying acts when these are perpetrated by a supervisor or manager.

Proposition 2 *Power distance will moderate the relationship between early bullying and resistance-based behaviors, whereby targets with low power distance will be more likely to engage in resistance-based behaviors than targets with high power distance.*

Recognition of Bullying and Resistance-Based Responses: Learned Helplessness

Learned helplessness theory (Abramson et al. 1978; Seligman 1975) suggests that when individuals experience a negative situation or event that they perceive to be uncontrollable, they will come to believe that their efforts will be unrelated to outcomes (i.e., being bullied) and will feel a sense of helplessness (Harvey et al. 2006; Seligman 1975). Furthermore, Abramson et al. (1978) suggest that three deficits will be encountered when an individual perceives that an event is beyond his/her control. First, individuals will experience motivational deficits through their resulting expectation that outcomes will also be uncontrollable in the future. Second, individuals will experience cognitive deficits by learning that events are uncontrollable and encountering challenges in learning appropriate responses to future events. Third, an individual will experience emotional deficits such as depressed affect through their perception that outcomes are beyond control.

Learned helplessness theory is useful in the context of workplace bullying, which entails negative events that may be perceived as uncontrollable (D'Cruz and Noronha 2010). These feelings of helplessness can be elicited through targets' beliefs that management supports the

perpetrator; little can be done to stop the perpetrator; and/or perceptions that the organization will not support the target. Hence, employees' feelings of a lack of control over the bullying behaviors may deter employees, regardless of cultural differences, from resisting the bullying. For example, an individualistic employee, earlier proposed to be more likely to resist bullying, may perceive that it is in his/her best interests to refrain from engaging in resistance-based responses when experiencing learned helplessness. Instead, he/she will come to believe that resistance will not help the situation because the bullying is perceived to be uncontrollable. Collectivistic employees will similarly feel helpless based on their original expectations of support from in-group members. While this may incite frustration from collectivistic employees, learned helplessness entails the depletion of employees' motivation and ability to react with resistance (Abramson et al. 1978).

When targets view the bullying behaviors as uncontrollable, they will tend to experience motivational deficits that will eliminate any motivation to respond to the bullying. Furthermore, targets will tend to experience cognitive deficits through their inability to learn effective responses to bullying behaviors. Thus, this will make them less likely to form resistance-based responses. Finally, targets will experience emotional deficits that lead to negative affect and reduced psychological well-being (Abramson et al. 1978). Indeed, Brotheridge and Lee (2010) recently found that targets report feeling restless and confused following bullying experiences, which suggest feelings of helplessness. Therefore, when targets believe that responses will not produce the outcomes desired and thus experience learned helplessness, they will be less likely to form resistance-based responses to bullying behaviors.

Proposition 3 *Learned helplessness will moderate the relationship between recognition of bullying and target resistance-based responses, whereby targets who experience learned helplessness will be less likely to engage in resistance-based responses.*

Resistance-Based Responses and Prolonged Workplace Bullying

Until now, this article has theorized the factors that may influence how a target responds to the perpetrator's early bullying behaviors. In this section, the implications of targets' responses to the perpetrator's early bullying behaviors are explored. It is proposed that the way in which targets respond to bullying behaviors (i.e., no response vs. resistance-based responses) will influence whether these behaviors continue over the longer term. Bies and Tripp (1998) found that targets' revenge behaviors were often

successful in deterring abusive supervisors. Similarly, Leck and Galperin (2006) in their study of employee responses toward bullying behaviors found that some employees were able to halt the perpetrator's bullying behaviors when they resisted perpetrators' early bullying behaviors. As mentioned, this resistance took several possible forms such as reporting the behaviors, telling the perpetrator that such behaviors will not be tolerated, and/or peers' collective outward support for the target.

D'Cruz and Noronha (2010) alternatively found that employees who reported bullying behaviors to their HRM department often failed to receive support. In addition, other researchers have interestingly found that reporting the behaviors can sometimes lead to increased bullying (see Zapf and Einarsen 2011) through counter-retaliation (Pruitt and Rubin 1986). While no response to the bullying behaviors will likely prolong the bullying as the lack of repercussions will tend to reinforce the perpetrator's perception of the employee as a "safe" target (Tepper et al. 2006), resistance-based responses are less clear and have produced mixed findings across studies. To explain these mixed findings, a key moderator to the relationship between targets' resistance-based behaviors and prolonged bullying is theorized and proposed in this section: perpetrator revenge behaviors. Perpetrator revenge behaviors and its antecedents are first discussed followed by the moderating relationship.

Perpetrator Revenge Behaviors: Antecedents

Many researchers have examined potential antecedents to revenge in the workplace. For example, researchers have found that blame attributions (Bradfield and Aquino 1999), personality (Emmons 2000), and lack of procedural justice (Aquino et al. 2006) can predict revenge-based behaviors. However, research on the potential antecedents of revenge behaviors to acts of aggression or bullying has been sparse. Even more limited have been investigations of the possible predictors of perpetrator revenge behaviors as a form of counter-retaliation. In this way, the bullying conflict escalates as a result of counter-retaliation or spiraling revenge (Aquino and Lamertz 2004; Pruitt and Rubin 1986). To further explain this article's conceptual model and spark future research on spiraling revenge, four key antecedents to perpetrator revenge behaviors are proposed.

First, one important factor that can predict whether a perpetrator exacts revenge in response to the target's resistance behaviors is the degree to which he/she believes the organization or HRM will support him/her. Some perpetrators may feel that they have strong levels of support from the organization or from HRM (D'Cruz and Noronha 2010). To illustrate, Tracy et al. (2006) found that employees sometimes described several important

members of the organization, including HRM representatives, colluding with the perpetrator against the target when he/she reported the bullying behaviors. This may particularly be the case when the perpetrator is a supervisor or manager who is bullying a subordinate. Nonetheless, this may also apply to other employees who feel that they have strong levels of support from HRM, which may be felt because of their performance levels, tenure, etc. When a perpetrator perceives that he/she has HRM or organizational support, he/she will be more likely to exact revenge-based behaviors.

A second important factor is the likelihood of other group members taking his/her side. As mentioned, Leck and Galperin (2006) found that in some instances peers stood up for the target against the perpetrator. In other cases, researchers have found that peers may take the perpetrator's side because of fear that supporting the target may result in him/her becoming the next target (D'Cruz and Noronha 2011). When perpetrators recognize that they have peer support, this can help them morally reason their response through diffusing responsibility (Detert et al. 2008). Moreover, perceived risks of becoming sanctioned by the team are reduced. Finally, the support gained from peers can reinforce the perpetrator's feelings that he/she is justified in his/her actions. Thus, when the perpetrator believes that coworkers will take his/her side rather than supporting the target, he/she will become increasingly likely to carry out revenge behaviors.

A third key factor may be the perpetrator's perceptions of the extent to which the target might escalate the conflict. Having engaged in resistance-based behaviors in response to the perpetrator's initial bullying behaviors, the perpetrator may fear that the target will continue to escalate resistance behaviors. The perpetrator may begin to feel threatened by this escalation of conflict. For instance, physical forms of resistance by the target may induce fears in the perpetrator that the target will become increasingly violent. Alternatively, the perpetrator may come to believe that the benefits derived from his/her bullying behaviors on the target are not worth further conflict escalation. Nevertheless, when a perpetrator does not feel threatened by the escalation of the conflict, he/she will become more likely to engage in revenge-based behaviors.

Finally, a fourth key factor will be the perpetrator's own personal disposition. If the perpetrator has high revenge cognitions and will exact revenge regardless of the consequences, which may essentially be driven by high levels of ego (Victor and Cullen 1988), then he/she will be more likely to escalate and increase the bullying. High levels of narcissism may also help explain a perpetrator's revenge cognitions toward escalating the bullying upon targets' active reactions (Wu and Lebreton 2011). Moreover, the perpetrator may feel that his/her pride and reputation is

threatened if he/she gives up due to the target's resistance. This threat to pride and reputation will similarly increase revenge cognitions. Thus, when the perpetrator has high revenge cognitions, he/she will be more likely to engage in revenge behaviors.

Proposition 4a *Perpetrators' perceived HRM support will be positively related to perpetrator revenge behaviors.*

Proposition 4b *Perpetrators' perceived peer support will be positively related to perpetrator revenge behaviors.*

Proposition 4c *Perpetrators' fear about threats of escalation will be negatively related to perpetrator revenge behaviors.*

Proposition 4d *Perpetrators' revenge cognitions will be positively related to perpetrator revenge behaviors.*

Resistance-Based Behaviors and Prolonged Workplace Bullying: Perpetrator Revenge Behaviors

Tepper et al. (2006) suggested that some perpetrators seek to victimize those who are considered "safe" to target. In other words, perpetrators will engage in abusive behaviors toward employees when they believe that they will not face significant repercussions or consequences. Leck and Galperin (2006) found that some employees who retaliated against the perpetrator were successful in stopping the bullying. Consistent with Tepper et al.'s (2006) hypothesis of perpetrators' desire to victimize "safe" targets, the employees who were successful in halting bullying in Leck and Galperin's (2006) study may have been those whose perpetrator felt the repercussions were too costly once the target engaged in resistance-based behaviors. As targets' resistance behaviors increase, the perpetrator's perception of the target as one who is "safe" to bully is likely to decrease accordingly.

In proposing antecedents to perpetrator revenge behaviors, four key constructs were posited: perceived HRM support, perceived peer support, threats of escalation, and revenge cognitions. These constructs can help predict whether the perpetrator will engage in revenge-based behaviors or counter-retaliation. When perpetrators engage in revenge-based behaviors, the bullying will likely escalate and intensify. When bullying is escalated it is particularly rare for the behaviors to stop until the target or perpetrator leaves the organization (Matthiesen et al. 2003). The revenge behaviors by the perpetrator may serve as commitment toward the bullying, making it less likely that the bullying will eventually stop. Indeed, researchers have argued that workplace bullying is generally expected to intensify over time and widen the power disparity between the target and the perpetrator (Einarsen et al. 2003). This intensification of the bullying over time is

particularly expected when perpetrators escalate the bullying behaviors in response to resistance from the target. In fact, some perpetrators may then view themselves as a target and believe that their initial behaviors were justified (Ferris et al. 2007). They may come to blame the escalation of conflict on the targets' "over-reaction" to his/her justified behaviors (Einarsen et al. 2003).

Whether targets further resist the perpetrator's revenge behaviors will have little influence in deterring the bullying behaviors from the perpetrator unless a simultaneous change occurs in one or more of the four antecedents to perpetrator revenge behaviors (i.e., perceived HRM support, perceived peer support, threats of escalation, revenge cognitions). For instance, if the target further resists the perpetrator's revenge-based behaviors with more overt behaviors such as aggression or violence, this may more strongly impact the threat of escalation perceived by the perpetrator. However, assuming little change in the four antecedents to perpetrators' revenge behaviors, when targets' resistance-based behaviors are followed by counter-retaliation and revenge by the perpetrator, it is expected that the intensification of such behaviors will accelerate and the bullying will become prolonged. Alternatively, when perpetrators do not counter-retaliate with revenge in response to targets' resistance-based responses, the bullying will likely end.

Proposition 5 *Perpetrator revenge behaviors will moderate the relationship between target resistance-based responses and prolonged bullying, whereby perpetrator revenge behaviors will be more likely to result in prolonged bullying.*

Discussion

The application of Hofstede's (1980) framework of cultural dimensions, specifically individualism versus collectivism and power distance, provides valuable insights into characteristics that can help explain how employees may respond to subtle bullying behaviors. This theory-driven analysis proposes that employees with certain cultural values (e.g., individualistic, low power distance) will be more likely to engage in resistance-based responses when experiencing subtle bullying behaviors. Furthermore, while a number of studies have examined the roles of personality (Glaser et al. 2007; Persson et al. 2009), age (Vartia 1996), gender (Lewis and Gunn 2007; Leymann 1996), race/ethnicity (Fox and Stallworth 2005; Lewis and Gunn 2007), and ethical climate (Bulutlar and Unler Oz 2009) with workplace bullying, research exploring the role of culture has been sparse (Loh et al. 2010).

Perpetrator revenge behaviors were also posited as a key construct in the model in influencing whether bullying

becomes prolonged. Perpetrator revenge behaviors were a key construct proposed to predict whether resistance-based responses from targets would result in prolonged bullying. This construct provides a potential explanation for why some researchers have found that target resistance behaviors can reduce bullying (Leck and Galperin 2006), while other researchers have found that it can provoke further bullying (D'Cruz and Noronha 2011). Moreover, antecedents to perpetrator revenge behaviors were also proposed. In the context of spiraling revenge or counter-retaliation, limited research has explored which factors may motivate employees to engage in counter-retaliation. Perceived HRM support, perceived peer support, threats of escalation, and revenge cognitions are proposed as antecedents to perpetrator revenge behaviors. Finally, this analysis also differentiated between the early stages of bullying and behaviors that become prolonged. In the sections below, the theoretical and practical implications of the article are discussed and directions for future research are offered.

Theoretical Contributions and Areas for Future Research

This article makes a number of important contributions to the workplace bullying literature. First, this analysis proposed the important role that culture can play in the context of workplace bullying. As outlined earlier, culture has received scant attention in the workplace bullying literature. However, culture encompasses a set of values, beliefs, and attitudes that can help explain individual behavior. In this article, it is proposed that the cultural values of an employee can make him/her more likely to resist bullying behaviors when he/she is subjected to them. This has important implications for research on target reactions to bullying, which is still in its early stages (Leck and Galperin 2006). Furthermore, the conceptual model proposed that employees who resist bullying may provoke further revenge behaviors from perpetrators. This has significant theoretical implications for counter-retaliation and spiraling revenge research, particularly in relation to bullying. Understanding the factors that can prevent perpetrator revenge can be especially useful in preventing prolonged bullying. Therefore, future research should empirically test the antecedents posited in this model and investigate how bullying can be prevented in its early stages.

Workplace bullying has been commonly investigated as a single event. Although researchers have acknowledged the long duration of bullying, limited attention has been provided to examining the early versus later stages of bullying. Because bullying is a process and not a single act, researchers should examine the full process of bullying, which can include understanding how bullying acts intensify and evolve over time, how targets perceive these acts

over time, and how targets react to these acts over time. This article provides a first step in this direction. More specifically, by examining target reactions to bullying in its early stages, this analysis enables us to understand the dyadic-level dynamics that can either halt or prolong bullying over time. Future research should continue in this direction by more strongly understanding the process-based nature of bullying and how bullying in its early stages differs from bullying in its later stages. Several researchers have already suggested that targets can become increasingly unlikely to react to bullying as it progresses (Baillien et al. 2009); thus, a focus on bullying in its early stages can be especially fruitful.

This article also makes a contribution to research on the perpetrator. In the extant workplace bullying literature, there is very limited research that investigates the perpetrator (Einarsen et al. 2003). This is a glaring gap in workplace bullying research. The theoretical analysis in this article proposes a number of cognitive and perceptual factors that can influence whether a perpetrator escalates bullying further. This includes perceived HRM support, perceived peer support, threats of escalation, and revenge cognitions. The former three constructs may be antecedents to early bullying as well. Future research should test the role that these factors play in predicting bullying behaviors from the perpetrator. Understanding the cognitive factors related to perpetrator behaviors can open up a number of possible directions for research on the perpetrator of bullying.

Practical Implications

This article has important implications for practice. If certain cultural groups are less likely to react to bullying, this may make them more likely to be targeted by perpetrators. This is because perpetrators may view these employees as “safe” targets because of the lack of potential repercussions. Indeed, the possibility of employees from certain cultural groups being targeted more frequently entails significant legal and ethical implications for the organization. To counteract this, management may be able to identify employees who have certain cultural characteristics such as high collectivism or high power distance as “at-risk”. This would allow managers to be proactive in recognizing the risks they face and formulate solutions that prevent such employees from experiencing bullying. For instance, attributional training can be provided to employees that can help them identify questionable behaviors. Hence, these employees would be more likely to recognize bullying acts when they occur and report such behaviors to prevent bullying from affecting performance, absenteeism, and/or job satisfaction.

Finally, HRM and organizational support has been posited in the model as an antecedent to perpetrator

revenge behaviors. This support may even represent an antecedent to early bullying behaviors from a perpetrator. Thus, HRM and organizations must be careful not to provide signals that may suggest their support for those who engage in abusive behaviors toward others. Strict HRM policies against behaviors such as workplace bullying can be explicitly conveyed and developed to reduce perceptions of support that perpetrators may have when considering whether to bully others.

Conclusion

This article proposed that employees high in collectivism and power distance are less likely to form resistance-based responses to subtle forms of bullying in its early stages. Learned helplessness can also result from bullying behaviors, which can further reduce targets' likelihood to resist such behaviors. For employees who are more likely to engage in resistance-based responses, perpetrator revenge behaviors and counter-retaliation can lead to prolonged bullying. However, a number of factors such as perceived HRM support, perceived peer support, threats of escalation, and revenge cognitions can influence whether a perpetrator escalates the bullying through revenge-based behaviors. Future research should test the role of culture in explaining targets' reactions to bullying, while considering how perpetrators may respond based on environmental factors such as perceptions of organizational and HRM support.

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