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An Integrative Review of Causes and Effects of Workplace Bullying: Research and Policy Implications for Botswana

Dr Gorewang Seropola Gorewang

PhD (Organizational Psychology,) MSc (Managerial Psychology), B (Social Work),

Abstract

Workplace bullying (WB) is one of the most common challenges facing organizations, government institutions and departments alike, often carrying psycho-social, economic and health implications. Currently, little research on WB has been conducted in Botswana, making it difficult to attach quantitative measurements. It is becoming increasingly important for academics, researchers, organizational psychologists, and Human Resource (HR) practitioners to invest more time and resources in the subject. Using an Integrative Literature Review (ILR) approach, this paper explores available literature on the causes and effects of WB and implications for research, legal statutes, and policy in Botswana. The Google search engine was used to identify and retrieve research papers written on WB. Fifty- nine (59) online papers were identified, with 26 found to be relevant to the research topic while 33 did not meet the inclusion criteria. Causes and effects of WB were synthesized and analyzed according to emerging themes. Work-related stress, personality traits, toxic organizational cultures and unhealthy competition are some of the causes of WB. Workplace bullying is predominantly covert, making it difficult to recognize and address. Victims of WB often find it difficult to speak out due to fear of further victimization. Effects of WB manifest in the form of anxiety, depression, fear, and, in extreme scenarios, suicide. The introduction of the Employment and Labour Relations Act of 2025 marked a significant shift in identifying and responding to WB. However, the Act should be effected to the extent that WB can be robustly addressed, and hold individual organizations, government ministries and departments accountable.

Keywords: Bullying, Policy, Research, Organizations, Workplace

1. Introduction

The workplace is an arena where different kinds of people meet and interact. According to Pheko (2018), employment and the workplace allow workers to engage with one another, and create a sense of belonging and identity. Employees spend a significant portion of their time at their workplaces. In Botswana, for example, workers spend a minimum of eight hours a day at their places of employment, which translates to forty hours on weekdays. According to the American Bureau of Statistics (2024), people work 8.4 hours on an average weekday and 5.6 hours on an average weekend. Many times, organizations comprise people of different temperaments, characters, personalities, and skills, and in some instances, there are different tribes and nationalities. Basically, workplaces can be classified as places of convergence. To embrace diversity, organizations employ and deploy personnel with different, often conflicting

characteristics, making workplace conflicts inevitable. Michetti (2020) emphasizes the importance in supporting the survival of organizations.

Despite the obvious positive role of work in the lives of people, relationships between workers sometimes deteriorate, leading to hostile and hazardous behaviours, environments, and outcomes (Chappell and Di Martino, 2006) in Pheko (2018). However, it is important to draw a distinction between personality and character clashes from workplace bullying. Across different organizations, there are individuals who are famous for bullying others, making the workplace unbearably toxic. The subject of workplace bullying has been under the radar for decades, and it is common knowledge that it exists. Gillen, Sinclair, Kernohan, Begley, and Luyben (2017) in Michetti (2020: 8) posit that while some organizations have implemented clear policies to offer guidelines concerning the code of conduct, appropriate and inappropriate workplace behaviours, disrespectful behaviours like bullying still exist in the workplace.

Using available literature and data from existing research, the paper reviews and discusses causes and effects of workplace bullying (WB), as well as research and, legal and policy implications for Botswana.

2. Definition and description of workplace bullying

Bullying has often been associated with young people, especially in school or academic environments (Makumbe, Khumalo, Ntsizwane, and Lisita, 2025). However, lived experiences and emerging literature demonstrates that bullying goes far beyond age, organisational, geographic, and cultural boundaries (Busby et al, 2022) in (Makumbe et al, 2025). In essence, bullying can no longer be confined to or associated with young and/or immature people; it is a widespread phenomenon (Selemogwe, Setlhare-Oagile, and Mphele, 2014). Research on bullying first came to the fore through the work of Leymann (a psychiatrist) in the 1990s and was expanded further to include WB (Rai and Agarwal, 2018). In Botswana, episodes of WB have often been reported and discussed (unofficially) on social media platforms. There are instances where survivors/ victims of WB confide on their fellow colleagues regarding their experiences with bullies in the workplace.

Workplace bullying can be defined as repeated negative social behaviour directed at organisational members over time (Dan, 2023; Einarsen et al, 2011; Escartín et al., 2021;). At the core of WB is power dynamics and persistent negative behaviour towards another employee (Rai and Agarwal, 2018; Makumbe et al, 2025). Workplace bullying often emanates from the desire to dominate, belittle and cause emotional or physical harm to those who are perceived to be having lesser power and control. In many instances, those who are ill-treated find it difficult to defend themselves (Nielsen, Einarsen, Parveen, and Rosander, 2024). Bullying appears to occur in organizations where certain employees believe there are no restrictions on engaging in abusive and disrespectful behaviours such as bullying (Micheti, 2020). These negative behaviours can include shouting, intimidation, spreading rumours and/or lies, gossip, social exclusion, sabotage, withholding key information, harassment, and undermining (Dan, 2023; Makumbe et al., 2025; Nielson et al., 2024). These behaviours and actions make the workplace unbearable and dysfunctional (Pheko, 2018). To add further understanding, Ahmad, Mehta, Shakeel, Naeem, and Shahid (2025) posit that WB is a form of deviant behaviour that often manifests in the workplace. In studying and writing on WB, it is important to differentiate between bullying and exercising authority, and ensuring accountability, and enforcing adherence to workplace regulations and standards. It is possible to misconstrue genuine disciplinary processes as WB. It is worth highlighting that both genders (men and women) can be perpetrators of WB.

3. Where is the gap in Botswana?

There is growing undocumented and informal evidence to prove that WB is on the rise across many organizations in Botswana. However, it is difficult to establish the veracity of the information without documented scientific processes of identifying WB. Prevalence is estimated at an alarming11-18% globally, with higher rates in healthcare, education and public sector (Nielsen and Einarsen, 2018). Despite evidence of research in other countries, there is limited localized literature in the context of Botswana. Available literature only paints the picture of studies conducted in Scandinavian nations, Europe and United States of America, making it urgent to scale up local research to guide policy and practice in Botswana.

4. Review justification

Workplace bullying is one of the emerging psycho-social and workplace challenges that warrants utmost attention. According to Samnani and Singh (2012) in Rai and Agarwal (2018), and Ahmad, Mehta, Shakeel, Naeem, and Shahid (2025) the theoretical introduction of the workplace bullying construct by Leymann (1990), makes it an important area of research, especially in management studies. Information in the public domain points out that employees spend a significant amount of their time at the workplace, therefore making them susceptible to different types of behaviours manifesting in the workplace (Makumbe, et al, 2025). To further demonstrate that WB needs urgent attention, a study in the US showed that a staggering 47% of people had faced some workplace bullying in the first 2 years of their job (Ahmad et al, 2025). Numerous studies also demonstrate that as high as 14.6% of employees face workplace bullying (Nielsen, Matthiesen and Einarsen, 2010). It is important to establish if the picture holds true for Botswana. Xiao and Watson (2019) point out that knowledge advancement must be built on prior existing work. There is a need to critique already existing literature to assess relevance, and ability to address occupational challenges such as WB

5. Objectives of the review

a. To synthesize existing workplace bullying findings and literature.
b. To motivate for Botswana specific workplace bullying research

6. Methods

A literature review is an excellent way to synthesize research findings to present evidence at a meta-level and to identify areas where more research is needed, a critical component of creating theoretical frameworks and building conceptual models (Snyder 2017: 333). In support of the literature review as a research methodology, Snyder (2019) argues that the approach is particularly important due to the difficulties associated with keeping up with state-of-the-art research. Literature review is also a comparatively cheaper and less intense method of conducting research. There are various methodologies for conducting a literature review. Synder (2019) and Lubbe et al (2020) highlight three methods of literature review: semi-systematic, systematic, and integrative. The study utilized an integrative literature review (ILR). This paper takes a descriptive approach, with an integration of thematic analysis. Themes are identified and extracted from the literature, grouped, and synthesized and analysed (Thomas and Harden, 2008).

7. Literature identification process

Different studies on the effects of workplace bullying were selected from academic databases: Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Emerald Insight, and ScienceDirect. The literature search included concepts and keywords such as: workplace bullying, causes of workplace bullying, effects of workplace bullying, the extent of workplace bullying, bullies in the workplace, and research on workplace bullying, legislation on workplace bullying Abstracts from each paper were read to assess their relevance to the research topic and the methodology of the literature review.

Eligibility

Inclusion

- Literature that is centered on the causes and effects of workplace bullying
- Any literature regardless of the year of publication.
- Books and studies from all disciplines
- Books and studies written in English

Exclusion

- Online sources without evidence of peer review
- Books and studies written in any language other than English
- Opinion papers without clear-cut scientific approaches

8. Results

A total of 59 studies were identified through on-line platforms. After reading, and scrutinizing, titles and abstracts were screened for relevance, 41 studies were included in the full-text assessment. Of these, 15 were excluded due to various reasons such as; missing dates of publications, unverifiable methodology and lack of scholarly rigour. As a result, 26 studies met the inclusion criteria and were included into the final analysis

9. Discussions and analysis

Extraction and analysis of data from identified literature focused on two key aspects: Causes of workplace bullying and Effects of workplace bullying. The causes and effects of workplace bullying were broken down and analyzed according to different thematic areas.

9.1 Causes of workplace bullying

According to Einarsen et al (2011) at a broader level, WB manifests in three forms; 1, work related bullying which includes excessive workload, withholding information and impossible deadlines, 2. person related bullying such as gossip, lies, humiliation, exclusion and 3. physical intimidation: invasion of space, threatening, swearing, intimidating. Michetti (2020) points out that bullying in the workplace extends to co-workers, immediate supervisors or managers, and subordinates. Researchers and scholars agree that there are many and varied causes of WB.

9.1a. Power dynamics in organizations

Power dynamics within organizations play a significant role in determining how employees interact with one another. Some employees may choose to use their privileged positions to bully and undermine others. Makumbe et al (2025) posit that WB involves an escalating process in which an unbalanced power relationship develops between the target and the perpetrator. In essence, those who carry less power and influence within organizations find themselves in situations where they are often subjected to intimidation and many other different forms of abuse. This is essentially attributed to their inability to defend

themselves against bullies. This is not to suggest that it is only individuals occupying high positions who perpetrate abuse, but rather that there are also subordinate employees who find themselves in positions of privilege and may decide to disrespect and disregard fellow employees.

9.1b Work-related stress

Work-related stress is one of the factors that is considered to be contributing to workplace bullying. Dan (2023) points out that employees who experience high levels of work-related stress are likely to behave in a more hostile and abusive manner. A lack of a supportive workplace environment can result in frustration, bitterness, and anger, which some employees may find difficult to cope with and could end up venting or releasing the negative energy on other employees. In essence, the lack of employee support structures could fuel WB. However, Ahmad et al (2025) seem to add two perspectives in explaining the relationship between work-related stress and WB: 1. Workplace bullying is presented as a key factor in raising stress levels in employees, and 2. There is an agreement that unchecked work-related stress contributes to WB.

9.1c Personality traits

Personality traits play an important role in determining the extent to which an individual can bully others. Individuals with narcissistic personality disorder are more likely to bully others in the workplace. Narcissistic individuals always want to be the center of attention, have a sense of entitlement and display arrogance. Again, workers who are introverted and submissive are more susceptible to bullying (Einarsen, 2003). Aquino and Bradfield (2006) observed that environmental factors and victim's individual differences could provoke harassment and bullying. Einarsen (2011) further adds that bullying can happen to anyone in the workplace. This could be attributed to different power and influence levels in the organization. In essence, bullies can also be bullied by those who are stronger than them in the organization, and the unsavory cycle continues. However, having a particular personality should not give permission to bully weaker members of an organization.

9.1d Unhealthy workplace competition

Unhealthy competition in the workplace has been identified as one of the causes of WB. Some individuals in organizations do not want to be outdone by their co-workers. They always want to come on top and do not take kindly to being out performed. Instead of viewing good performance by their fellow workers as motivation to improve their own performance, they take offense. Numerous studies attest to the assertion. A survey conducted among 30 participants in Ireland discovered that two-thirds of the victims believed that the bully was envious of their achievements in the workplace (O'Moore, Seigne, McGuire and Smith, 1998). In this regard, victims of bullying are regarded as overachievers who do deserve to be given recognition. To buttress this observation, Namie (2007) points out that bullies' target individuals that they regard as personally threatening. Furthermore, Namie (2007) observes four key reasons that motivate bullies being; targets refuse to be subservient, possess more technical skills than the bully, and are also better liked than the bully. Salin and Hoel (2011) add that bullying can also be exacerbated by desperate desires for promotions and better pay. Pheko, Monteiro and Segopolo (2017) draws a distinction between male and female bullies. Men are expected to be more competitive in the workplace, often creating a fertile environment for WB. Einarsen sees high job insecurity as a key driver of unhealthy competition. In Botswana, competitive bullying often leads to poor service delivery as a result of lack of motivation to perform, absenteeism and staff turnover (Pule, 2017 and Einarsen, 2003). Einarsen (2003) concludes that poor leadership is the root cause of unhealthy workplace competition.

9.1e Toxic organizational culture

Toxic organizational environment comprises organizational culture that includes ostracism, narcissism,

aggressive behavior, harassment, bullying and incivility (Rasool, Wang, Tang, Saeed and Igbal, 2021). Organizational culture emanates from what leaders permit or prevent. High power distance, tolerance of bullying due to lack of policies, competitive and bureaucratic environments provide a platform for a toxic organizational culture Studies show 37.8% of employers had no response to bullying reports. Additionally, WB remain unreported due to fear of further victimization. Perpetrators use intimidating and threatening language such as; 'you will be fired/ I am the one who determines your continued stay in the organization'. Hauge, Skogstad and Einarsen (2007) point out that authoritarian style of leadership is a key ingredient to WB. Authoritarian leaders have little or no regard to the emotions and feelings of their subordinates, and this can spread across the organization. Pheko, et al (2017) are of the view that toxic work places serve as a breeding ground for workplace bullies who often feel unregulated and have a free ticket to ill-treat fellow colleagues, sometimes in the guise of supervision and employee performance monitoring. In Botswana for example; Pheko (2017) terms the practice 'supervision by tyranny'. Organizations must establish more humane ways of strengthening organizational performance without abusing or denigrating fellow employees.

9.2 Effects of Workplace bullying

Effects of WB are many and varied. WB carries affects individuals (victims) and organizations.

9.2.1 Individual Effects

a. Psychological

Nielsen and Einarsen (2018) indicate that being bullied changes personality, increases anxiety and depression. Basically, there are employees who find themselves suffering in their individual lives as a result of being bullied at their workplaces. O'Moore et al (1998) confirm from their study that WB damages health and careers. Work becomes unenjoyable as a result of the existence of unchecked workplace bullies. Some victims end up choosing to leave their jobs, leading to loss of income and economic suffering. Nielsen, Glaso and Einarsen (2017) indicate that 40-50% of victims of WB end up quitting as a result of emotional exhaustion and learned helplessness. Most documented psychological effects of WB include anxiety, depression, burnout, emotional exhaustion, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and increased suicidal ideation. In litigated cases, 53.3% reported stress, 4.4% PTSD. On the other side there is the likelihood of victims fighting back against their abusers, which potentially makes the workplace even more unbearable. Nielsen and Einarsen (2018) emphasize that workplace bullying is a traumatic stressor with long term psychological effects. Victims have to contend with a replay of their negative experiences, which often carries a lot of fear.

b Physical

The most common physical effects of WB related stress are; headaches, sleep disorders, gastrointestinal issues, cardiovascular related conditions such as palpitations, high blood pressure and chest tightness; weakened immunity. Nielsen et al (2017) point out 60-70% of WB targets experience headaches and migraines. Employees who experience these kind of conditions may become unproductive in the long term.

9.3 Organizational Effects

a Productivity & Performance

As a result of experiencing WB, victims may find themselves losing interest in continuing to work or they may report for work but find themselves unmotivated to work. Olaleye and Lekunze (2023) acknowledge that WB has the potential to have a negative impact on productivity. Pule (2017) linked bullying to poor

public service delivery in Botswana. For many years, Botswana public service has been characterized by poor service delivery and high dissatisfaction among service recipients. Liu, e at (2020) point out that WB destabilizes the work environment, reduces performance and productivity. Pheko (2018) specifically pin points gossip and rumors as factors that often undermine cohesion in the workplace and negatively affect performance and productivity. According to Watson (2017) bullying leads to low trust and low productivity. Bullying has an effect on organizational growth and efficient service provision.

b. Staff turnover

Studies have shown that there is a positive relationship between WB and staff turnover (Nielsen and Einarsen, 2012). As a result of distress, reputational damage and dejection emanating from WB, some employees find resignation as a panacea to their ordeal. In some instances, employees are compelled to request for transfers to other duty stations or locations as a way of escaping WB, often resulting in inconvenience to the victim. A study conducted by Pule (2017), discovered that officers request to be transferred to escape from bullies. Botha (2017) points out that even bystanders feel intimated, and uncomfortable to the extent that they always signal intentions to leave, sometimes with nowhere to go, resulting in loss of income and means of continued sustenance. Loss of income does not only affect the victim, but also those who are dependent on him or her. In some instances, organizations loose skilled personnel to their competitors in the labour market.

c. Financial cost of Workplace Bullying

WB also carries financial implications for organizations. Organizations, including the government expend a lot of resources (human and financial) to train and equip employees with the aim of building competencies necessary for organizational growth. More costs are incurred whenever new officers have to be trained. Hoel, Sparks and Cooper (2001) observe that recruitment of replacement staff costs organizations in terms of advertisement, engaging recruitment agencies, vetting exercises as well as training. In the United Kingdom (UK), bullying costs employers 2 billion pounds whereas in Australia it is between 6-13 billion dollars per annum (Hoel et al, 2001).

10 Theoretical underpinning of Workplace Bullying

To further understand the dynamics of workplace bullying, the review integrates the ecological perspective on the workplace. The ecological theory was developed by Bronfenbrenner. Ecological Systems theory describes human development through the prism of the "environmental interconnections and their impact on the forces directly affecting psychological growth" (Crawford, 2020: 1). The ecological theory evolved, with other scholars and researchers developing other models to help understand human development. The ecological model of workplace bullying was developed to understand workplace bullying. According to Johnson (2011), the ecological model of workplace bullying consists of four interrelated systems that encompass occurrences that constitute workplace bullying. The four systems include: the microsystem (the bully and target), the mesosystem (the immediate workgroup, including the manager), the exosystem (the organization), and the macrosystem (society). The workplace is undoubtedly an important player in terms of influencing human behavior. Basically, the workplace can either build or destroy the lives of employees. The framework is relevant because it presents an in-depth understanding of relationships and interactions in the workplace

12 Research, Legal and Policy Implications for Botswana

12a. Research

Limited research on WB has been conducted in Botswana, and it is important to build on research findings by Pule (2017), Pheko (2018) and Pheko et al (2017). Even though research findings from studies conducted in European and Scandinavian countries and USA can be generalized, it is important to conduct research locally. There is need for proper context precisely due to: the difference in the labour market and practice, and cultural practices. Berry (1989) points out that due to cultural differences, tools used to assess bullying in the Western world may not address needs of other countries, including Botswana. Depending on cultural context, Pule (2017) opines that what is deemed as bullying maybe be seen as strict supervision in other countries. There is need to have research tools that are appropriate to Botswana context. Behaviors classified as abusive in developed countries may not fall within the same category in Botswana hence the need to conduct WB primary research in Botswana. Botswana is also classified as an upper-middle income country and reliance on data from the first world may not necessarily help in understanding WB. Localized research is essential for practice in Botswana. It is important for HR practitioners and legislators to be guided by findings from studies conducted locally. Botswana risks missing out on coming up with appropriate interventions for WB. Researchers and scholars alike, are important stakeholders in generating relevant scientific knowledge must prioritize research on WB. Furthermore, it is important for research on WB to cover a wide spectrum of organizations; the private sector, NGOs, parastatals, different government ministries and/or department, and many other institutions. Additionally, it is of paramount importance to conduct research on the implementation and effectives of the Labour and Employment Relations Act of 2025. Lastly, this review relied on old studies and there is need to have up to date data.

12b. Legal and policy implications

For many decades, Botswana employment act of 1982 (Cap 47:01) was silent on WB but rather contained some highlights on harassment. Pule (2017) observed that bullying has always been generally accepted because the law was silent. However, 2025 saw parliament introducing the Employment and Labour Relations Act, which officially came to effect on the 1st of September 2026, and the Act explicitly emphasizes protection against violence, harassment and discrimination. The law was put into effect in 2026. The new act is a consolidation of three older laws; the Employment Act, Trade Unions and Employers' Organizations Act and Trade Disputes Act. Notwithstanding the enactment of the law, different employment sectors still do not have workplace policies therefore constraining the effectiveness of the act. It is also important for Botswana Employment and Labour Act to integrate guidelines on good practice and compel organizations to develop and operationalize anti-bullying regulations. For example; a lot of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) do not have anti bullying policies. Johns (2006) points out implementing laws without contextualization to specific institutions or organizations is a vain undertaking. Organizations in Botswana must develop policies that do not only seek to fulfill some legal requirements but must aim to address every form of WB such as tribalism, punitive rural postings, sexism (Pule, 2017). Organizational policies must stipulate checks and balances for senior employees to prevent WB masquerading as strict supervision. It is common for leaders in organizations to intimidate, and threaten subordinates with dismissal if they do not submit to their authority, even when they are wrong. Promulgation of laws that seek to curb WB is a welcome development, but it is important to have in place policies and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) that support and enforce implementation of the Employment and Labour Relations Act of 2025. Lastly, organizations should have in place employee orientation on WB, its effects and actions that can be taken against perpetrators.

13. Conclusion

The review has discovered that workplace bullying remains one of the understudied phenomena. There is evidence of WB, and it carries devastating effects for victims and organizations. There is still limited knowledge on WB in Botswana and this review provides an ideal opportunity for leaders of organizations and HR Managers to understand causes and effects of bulling in the workplace. Botswana's transition from the Employment Act 1982 to the Employment and Labour Relations Act of 2025 presents an opportunity to address WB. Organizations must take responsibilities of addressing and/or averting WB by introducing the right policies and Standard Operating Procedures. Additionally, organizations must introduce platforms for educating employees about WB and how victims and other employees can report acts of bullying. It is critical to have in place measure for monitoring implementation and adherence to the new Act. To contextualize WB, researchers must come up with country and culture specific measurements. There are two main limitations from the review: it relied heavily on old research and literature hence the need the need for new studies; and while research and literature from Scandinavian countries, Europe and USA provide the much needed foundation, contextualization remains a challenge. It is important to conduct extensive local research.

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