Defining workplace bullying behaviour professional lay definitions of workplace bullying

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Abstract

As is commonly the case in new areas of research, workplace bullying researchers and practitioners have struggled to establish a single agreed-upon definition of this phenomenon. As a consequence, there are numerous definitions of workplace bullying currently in use around the world to investigate this serious workplace issue, to educate the workforce about this form of harassment and to assess claims involving allegations of workplace bullying. Additionally, little is known about how employees and people in general define workplace bullying behaviour, and whether current researcher, practitioner and legal definitions coincide with lay definitions of bullying. To compare researcher, practitioner and legal definitions of workplace bullying with lay definitions, the content of definitions composed by adults from diverse personal and professional backgrounds (N=1095) was analysed. Results confirmed that components commonly used by researchers and practitioners, including the occurrence of harmful and negative workplace behaviours, were frequently cited by participants as central defining components of bullying behaviour. In addition, lay definitions often included themes of fairness and respect. The emergence of these themes has important consequences for organisations responding to, and attempting to prevent the occurrence of workplace bullying behaviour in that organisations in which bullying is tolerated may violate both local laws as well as their ethical responsibility to provide employees with a safe, professional and respectful workplace.

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A major issue facing organisations worldwide is the occurrence of bullying behaviour amongst employees. Prior to the 1990’s, research on workplace harassment focused primarily on the serious issues of racial discrimination and sexual harassment. Harassing workplace behaviours that did not stem from race, gender or other legally protected attributes were underinvestigated. In 1992, Adams coined the term “workplace bullying” to describe a category of harassing behaviour that employees may be subjected to at any stage of their career, regardless of their membership in a protected class based on gender, ethnicity, age, etc. (Leymann, 1990). Preliminary investigations of this relatively new topic of workplace research demonstrate that employees report being subjected to bullying more frequently than to other harassing behaviours including gender discrimination, as well as sexual and racial harassment (Dunn, 2000; Lewis, 1999). Moreover, a growing body of research has documented the negative, sometimes devastating consequences that workplace bullying can have on both the employees who are targeted and on the organisation

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Given the prevalence of bullying and its potentially negative influence on employee and organisational well-being, it is not surprising that since the early 1990’s, this workplace issue has attracted the attention of researchers worldwide. In the past decade, a number of studies have been conducted to advance our understanding of this complex interpersonal behaviour.

To date, workplace bullying research has focused primarily on identifying the behavioural forms that bullying can take (Ayoko, Callan, & Hartel, 2003; Baron & Neuman, 1998; Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Hjelt-Back, 1994), measuring the frequency with which bullying behaviours occur in organisations (Einarsen & Raknes, 1997; Hogh & Dofradottir, 2001; Leymann, 1992; Salin, 2001), documenting the negative consequences that bullying can have on both the target and the organisation (Ayoko et al., 2003; Bjorkqvist et al., 1994; Einarsen & Raknes, 1997; Leymann, 1990; Price-Spratlen, 1995; Vartia & Hyyti, 2002), and identifying who is likely to participate in workplace bullying interactions as the target and as the bully (Ayoko et al., 2003; Keashly, Trott, & MacLean, 1994). Despite substantial advances in our knowledge of these topics, one of the most challenging issues with which workplace bullying researchers and practitioners have grappled is the development of an agreed-upon label and definition to capture the intricacies of this complex workplace behaviour.

Several different terms or labels are used interchangeably by researchers around the world to describe this form of negative workplace behaviour. “Mobbing” is commonly used in France and Germany (Leymann, 1990; Zapf, Knorz & Kulla, 1996). “Harassment” is the term preferred by some researchers in Finland (Bjorkqvist et al., 1994). In the USA, “aggression” (Baron & Neuman, 1998) and “emotional abuse” (Keashly, 2001) have been used. The term “workplace bullying” is used primarily by researchers in Australia (Sheehan, 1999), the United Kingdom (Rayner, 1997) and Northern Europe (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996).

The decision by researchers to use different terms stems from the type of behaviour that is reported to occur most frequently within the country in which bullying is being investigated. For example, in Germany, where the term mobbing is used, bullying is frequently reported to be perpetrated by a “mob” of bullies, rather than a single bully; a phenomenon which is not shared by other countries (Leymann, 1990; Zapf et al., 1996). In the USA, on the other hand, research has largely focused on the relatively high incidence of violent workplace behaviour (Baron & Neuman, 1998).

Some of difficulties in determining the most appropriate label for this broad and complex category of behaviour are also reflected in the struggle by researchers and practitioners to compose a universally accepted definition of workplace bullying. Definitions used by researchers investigating this serious workplace issue are generally very detailed and include four essential criteria, including (a) the negative effect of the behaviour on the target, (b) the frequency and (c) persistence of the behaviour, and (d) the power imbalance that a behaviour must create before the conduct is regarded as an example of bullying. For instance, one group of European researchers define workplace bullying as “harassing, offending, socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone’s work tasks...repeatedly and regularly and over a period of time...mobbing is an escalating process in the course of which the person confronted ends up in an inferior position and becomes the target of systematic negative social acts. A conflict cannot be called mobbing if the incident is an isolated event or if two parties of approximately equal “strength” are in conflict.” (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003, p. 15). Similar themes are prominent among researchers in Finland who define workplace bullying as “repeated and persistent negative acts towards one or more individual(s), which involve a perceived power imbalance and create a hostile work environment” (Salin, 2003, p. 1214).

By comparison, definitions applied by practitioners, unions and private-sector organisations tend to be more generally worded, and to emphasize the types of behaviours involved and the negative effects that bullying may have on the targets of the conduct. For example, WorkSafe Victoria, an Australia-based manager of workplace safety systems in organisations based in Victoria, defines workplace bullying as “repeated, unreasonable behaviour directed toward an employee or group of employees that creates a risk to health and safety” (WorkSafe Victoria, 2006). A union based in the United Kingdom similarly defines workplace bullying as “persistent, offensive, abusive, intimidating or insulting behaviour, abuse of power or unfair penal sanctions which makes the recipient feel upset, threatened, humiliated or vulnerable, which undermines their self-confidence and which may cause them to suffer stress,” (Amicus-MSF, 1994). Likewise, the Andrea Adams Trust Fund (1997), established in the UK to support targets and to promote awareness of workplace bullying, defines bullying as “unwarranted, offensive, humiliating, undermining behaviour towards an individual or group of employees and an abuse of power or position, that can cause such anxiety that people gradually lose all belief in themselves, suffering physical ill health and mental distress as a direct result,” (Andrea Adams Trust Fund, 1997).
Legal definitions of workplace bullying currently in use are most similar to the detailed definitions used within the scientific community, and generally focus on the negative behaviours involved, the persistence and frequency of the behaviour, and the harm inflicted on the target. The first anti-bullying law implemented in 1994 by the Ordinance of the Swedish National Board of Occupational Safety and Health, defines workplace victimisation as “…recurrent reprehensible or distinctly negative actions which are directed against individual employees in an offensive manner and can result in those employees being placed outside the workplace community,” (The Swedish National Board of Occupational Health and Safety, 1994). Legal definitions of workplace bullying adopted subsequently emphasise similar criteria. For example, the first anti-bullying law in North America came into effect on June 1, 2004 when the Canadian province of Quebec amended its Labour Standards Act to cover psychological harassment in the workplace. This new legislation defines psychological harassment as “any vexatious behaviour in the form of repeated and hostile or unwanted conduct, verbal comments, actions or gestures that affect an employee’s dignity or psychological or physical integrity and that results in a harmful work environment for the employee” (Commission des Normes du Travail, 2006).

Although there are variations in the precise language used to define workplace bullying, five elements that are most frequently used to define negative workplace experiences as bullying have been identified: “(1) targets experience negative behaviour; (2) behaviours are experienced persistently; (3) targets experience some harm, either psychological or physical; (4) targets perceive they have less power than the bully and, thus have difficulty defending themselves; and (5) targets label themselves “bullied” (Rayner & Keashly, 2004, p. 273). These core components have been instrumental in the formulation of workplace bullying definitions currently in use and in guiding the current research on workplace bullying. Nevertheless, debate amongst researchers and practitioners persists as to the whether each of the components is a central and necessary behavioural feature to distinguish bullying from other forms of negative workplace interpersonal behaviour (Rayner & Keashly, 2004). In general, the universally recognised essential definitional components are those which researchers have empirically demonstrated to have the most support. For example, the two elements of bullying that have garnered most research support are rarely disputed, namely: (a) the perpetration of some form of direct or indirect negative workplace behaviour and (b) the negative effect on the target of these behaviours. On the other hand, the three definitional components about which the research has been less conclusive, are regarded as important, but not essential or necessary defining features of workplace bullying behaviour, i.e., (c) persistence, (d) power imbalance and (e) labelling oneself as bullied (Rayner & Keashly, 2004).

1. Essential defining criteria

1.1. Types of workplace bullying behaviours

One feature common to all definitions of workplace bullying is the experience of negative verbal or non-verbal behaviour. Using victim accounts as a basis, a diverse array of negative workplace behaviours, ranging from the covert and subtle, such as a dirty look or a snide comment, to the overtly aggressive, such as an item being thrown or a physical threat, have been cited by researchers and practitioners as examples of workplace bullying conduct (Ayoko et al., 2003; Baron & Neuman, 1998; Bjorkqvist et al., 1994). When asked to indicate the types of behaviours they have experienced in their workplace, employees report that they are subjected to subtle and less obvious bullying behaviours much more frequently than they are subjected to more overt forms of bullying (Baron & Neuman, 1998). For example, an analysis of bullying within a wide variety of private and public sector organisations revealed that far more employees were targets of “less dramatic forms of verbal aggression,” including belittling the target’s opinions and talking behind the target’s back (Baron & Neuman, 1998, p. 447). Regardless of the nature and blatancy of the behaviour perpetrated, the perceptions of a behaviour by the target as negative and inappropriate is a core and agreed-upon component of any definition of workplace bullying.

1.2. Negative effects of workplace bullying

The inducement of harm is an essential and necessary component in all definitions of bullying. Notwithstanding the type of behaviour that occurs and the degree of persistence of the behaviour, researchers and practitioners generally agree that a negative workplace experience can only be defined as bullying if the target of the behaviour experiences some form of psychological, emotional or physical harm. A substantial amount of research has focused
on documenting the negative effect that bullying can have on employees. Targets of workplace bullies may suffer a wide range of physical and psychological symptoms, including stress and anxiety about work, nervousness, fearfulness, depression, loss of confidence, lowered job satisfaction and decreased organisational commitment (Ayoko et al., 2003; Bjorkqvist et al., 1994; Einarsen & Raknes, 1997; Leymann, 1990; Price-Spratlen, 1995; Vartia & Hyyti, 2002). Although the effect of being bullied can vary widely among individuals, the experience of being bullied is often life-altering and extremely traumatic. For example, one study investigating bullying at a Finnish university revealed that some participants demonstrated symptoms “reminiscent of posttraumatic stress disorder” including nervousness, aggressiveness, insomnia, apathy and sociophobia, as a direct result of exposure to bullying (Bjorkqvist et al., 1994, pp. 181–182).

In addition, despite the ambiguous nature of the more subtle forms of bullying that are reported to occur most frequently, these behaviours can have the same negative, and sometimes devastating effects on their targets as can the more overt and physical behaviours, especially if their occurrence is frequent (Mayhew et al., 2004). Therefore, exclusive of the behaviour perpetrated, the criterion that a target must experience some form of harm as a result of the behaviour perpetrated, is a component about which there is consensus and is central in any definition of workplace bullying.

2. Non-essential defining criteria

2.1. Persistence of workplace bullying

Associated with many definitions of workplace bullying is the criterion that a behaviour must occur more than once and must be experienced by a target on a frequent and persistent basis to warrant the label “bullying” (Einarsen et al., 2003). Persistent conduct is deemed an important defining component of workplace bullying interactions by many researchers and practitioners as it effectively distinguishes the severe and negative impact that bullying can have on targets from less severe consequences associated with one-off clashes and ordinary or mundane workplace incivilities and conflicts (Leymann, 1996). Nevertheless, there has been debate amongst researchers as to the length of time and frequency with which employees must be subjected to behaviour before their experience qualifies as bullying. Unlike sexual harassment, which can be defined by a single, severe incident, generally, researchers agree that a behaviour must occur more than once to be defined as bullying (Einarsen et al., 2003). However, there is disagreement as to how frequently and persistently behaviours must be experienced to distinguish them from other negative and inappropriate, but less harmful and malicious workplace interactions.

Related to this debate is variability with respect to the period of time (duration) within which the behaviour must occur and the frequency with which it must occur to qualify as bullying. For example, studies investigating the incidence of bullying have varied the duration of the period under consideration from specified recent periods, such as the past 6 or 12 months (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2001; Salin, 2001), to open-ended, unconstrained periods as extensive as “throughout your career” (Leymann, 1990). Different researchers have imposed different degrees of frequency with which behaviour must occur before it is defined by the researcher as bullying. For instance, some researchers define a behaviour as bullying if it occurs at least monthly (Salin, 2001) while others apply a more stringent standard and define participants as bullied only if they are exposed to negative workplace behaviours at least weekly (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2001). As can be expected, participants who report exposure to bullying over extensive periods of time (e.g., throughout one’s work history or within the past 12 months), and with less stringent frequency, such as monthly, produce higher incidence rates of bullying than is typical in studies in which participants report their level of exposure to bullying behaviours within more constrained periods of time (e.g., within the past 6 months) and with more stringent frequency (e.g., weekly). For example, Leymann (1990) estimated that 25% of the Swedish population experience bullying or mobbing at some point in their career, but the incidence level of predicted bullying fell to 3.5% when a stricter criterion of exposure during the past 6 months was utilised.

Unfortunately, definitional variations and the inclusion or exclusion of different definitional components of persistence and frequency in previous studies of workplace bullying have constrained the opportunity for direct comparisons between studies, and have limited the potential to draw firm conclusions about the research outcomes. Consequently, it has been a goal of both researchers (Rayner, Sheehan, & Barker, 1999) and practitioners (British Medical Association, 2006) to develop a uniform definition that includes an acceptable standard of the frequency and persistence with which behaviour must be perpetrated before it qualifies as bullying.
2.2. Perception of powerlessness in the bullying interaction

A sense of powerlessness experienced by the target is a frequently cited component in workplace bullying definitions (Rayner & Keashly, 2004). Specifically, it is purported that in order for targets to feel bullied, they must perceive that they are unable to defend themselves against the perpetrator, to cope with the behaviour perpetrated against them or to change the situation. This sense of vulnerability and lack of control serves to increase the perceived severity of the experience, thereby increasing the likelihood that the target will define the negative workplace experience as bullying (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

In many of the studies that have examined the incidence of workplace bullying in a variety of organisations across the globe, the researchers have simultaneously investigated the identity of the perpetrator. Most commonly, participants reported that they were bullied by their supervisors, to a lesser degree by their co-workers and, to an even smaller degree, by their subordinates. For example, in a study investigating the frequency of workplace bullying among Australian government employees, 41% of the bullied respondents indicated that they were bullied by their supervisor/group leader, 12% reported they were bullied by their co-workers, and 2% reported being bullied by their subordinates (Ayoko et al., 2003). Similarly, of 176 university employees surveyed about their experience with workplace bullying, 43% reported being harassed by a superior, 25% reported being harassed by a co-worker, and approximately 10% reported being harassed by a subordinate (Bjorkqvist et al., 1994).

One possible reason why employees report more bullying by their supervisors than by their co-workers or subordinates is that targets feel more defenceless and vulnerable if bullied by someone who possesses more formal power than themselves (Rayner & Keashly, 2004). Moreover, where the bully possesses less formal power than the target, other forms of power, such as knowledge and experience, or social affiliations within the workplace, may contribute to the target’s sense of vulnerability and inability to defend oneself, increasing the likelihood that the experience will be labelled and reported as bullying (Zapf & Einarsen, 2004).

Although a power imbalance between the target and the bully and a sense of vulnerability and inability to defend oneself against the actions of a bully are common components of many definitions of workplace bullying, as was noted above, debate continues as to whether this component is a necessary and defining feature of workplace bullying. To date, only formal power has been considered when evaluating whether a power imbalance exists between the bully and the target, thereby limiting the range of experiences, including being bullied by subordinates, to which many definitions of workplace bullying can be applied (Rayner & Keashly, 2004).

Additional research on the different forms of power that may be utilised by a bully is needed.

2.3. Labelling the negative experience as bullying

A topic of frequent discussion among researchers and practitioners is whether targets must recognise and acknowledge that they have been bullied before their experience qualifies as bullying (Archer, 1999; Ireland & Ireland, 2000; Keashly et al., 1994). Studies measuring the incidence of workplace bullying in different ways have revealed that many employees who are subjected to frequently occurring and persistent bullying do not label themselves as bullied (Jennifer, Cowie, & Ananiadou, 2003; Salin, 2001). For example, an investigation by Salin (2001) revealed that although 24.1% of the participants were classified as “bullied” according to an objective measure, only 8.8% of these participants self-defined as bullied. Similarly, in their analysis of bullying in workplaces in Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom, Jennifer and colleagues (2003) found that more participants (33.7%) were exposed to bullying behaviours to an extent to which they could objectively be defined as bullied than there were participants who self-reported as bullied (21.1%).

Several explanations have been offered for the discrepancy between the objective experience of bullying and the subjective acknowledgement of oneself as bullied. One proposed explanation is that targets may be reluctant to apply the label “bullied” to themselves because this label has negative connotations of victimisation and failure (Salin, 2001). Similarly, targets may be hesitant to apply this label to their experiences due to the physical and childish connotations that the label carries through its association with schoolyard bullying, which typically entails physical conduct (Ireland & Ireland, 2000). Given that most workplace bullying behaviours are non-physical and subtle compared to schoolyard bullying behaviours (Baron & Neuman, 1998; Keashly, 2001) this explanation appears plausible as targets who only have a schoolyard conceptual definition of bullying in mind may fail to recognise their workplace experience as similar. Thus, they will be unlikely or reluctant to apply the “bullied” label to their current workplace experience. Furthermore,
in many studies, a definition of workplace bullying is provided to participants who are then asked to indicate whether they have been bullied based on the criteria contained in that definition (Einarsen & Raknes, 1997; Hoel, Cooper, & Faragher, 2001; Salin, 2001). Participants may not self-report bullying if the definition provided does not coincide with their own personal experience or definition of bullying. Some commentators have also hypothesised that extensive individual variability exists in the perceived severity of a bullying interaction, and that these perceptions influence whether the conduct is deemed sufficiently severe to warrant the “bullied” label (Keashly et al., 1994). Clearly, research investigating the reasons as to why employees who are exposed to frequent and persistent bullying refrain from labelling themselves as bullied is needed.

2.4. Additional definitional criteria

A number of additional criteria proposed as important components in defining negative workplace experiences as bullying may also influence whether employees perceive their experiences as bullying. These additional definitional components include behaviour that is unwelcome and unsolicited by the target, behaviour that violates an implicit but unstated code or standard of appropriate workplace conduct towards others, and behaviour that is purposely perpetrated (Keashly & Harvey, 2003).

Although research to date is not informative on the question whether the criteria of unwelcomeness and inappropriateness of the workplace conduct in issue are common within lay definitions of workplace bullying, past research has shown that the criterion of intent may be an important definitional feature that leads more targets to perceive that they have been bullied. The frequency and duration of workplace bullying behaviour has led some researchers to speculate that perpetrators are aware of the inappropriateness of their behaviour, and that their actions are intended to harm their targets (Zapf & Einarsen, 2004). Although intent is not considered an essential component of researcher and practitioner definitions of workplace bullying due to the difficulties associated with proving that a bully acted intentionally, perceived intent may influence whether targets determine that they have been bullied. Some targets may be reluctant to label their experience as bullying if their personal definition of workplace bullying includes a criterion of intent, or if the definition they are provided does not coincide with their own definition.

3. The significance of a uniform definition of workplace bullying

There are several reasons why a uniform definition of workplace bullying is desirable. As is noted above, the use of varying definitions by researchers worldwide has limited the opportunity for the findings of studies to be compared and for firm conclusions to be made. Development of a uniform definition of workplace bullying will aid the development of strategies to address this serious and prevalent workplace issue. Similarly, from a legal perspective, the development of a uniform definition of workplace bullying will clarify guidelines to assist in the assessment of individual cases of workplace bullying.

Development of a uniform definition of workplace bullying will have significant benefits for organisations. Conservatively, it has been estimated that an individual case of bullying can cost an organisation between US $30,000–$100,000 (Rayner, 2000). The total annual cost of bullying in organisations throughout the UK, once losses attributable to increased absenteeism and employee turnover as a result of bullying are considered, is approximately 1.880 billion pounds (Hoel, Sparks, & Cooper, 2001). Due to the high costs associated with the occurrence of workplace bullying it is in the best interest of organisations to develop strategies to manage workplace bullying behaviour. In addition to aiding in the development of workplace bullying policies and training programs, a uniform definition of workplace bullying will protect organisations by ensuring that they define bullying in the same way as their employees, thereby reducing the risk of violating the psychological contract they hold with their employees (Adams & Bray, 1992).

3.1. The psychological contract

The concept of the psychological contract has played a key role in the organisational justice literature and has great relevance in helping to explain why many individuals are negatively affected by exposure to workplace bullying (Thomas-Peter, 1997). The psychological contract is a set of expectations and rules which forms the psychological basis for the continuing commitment of an employee to their employer. Unlike formal employment contracts, psychological contracts are more subjective, and the elements comprising the agreement do not necessarily need to be
agreed upon by each party. In fact, “both parties may not share a common understanding of all contract terms. Each party only believes that they share the same interpretation of the contract,” (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994, p. 246).

Psychological contracts can be both transactional and/or relational (MacNeil, 1985). Transactional contracts are based on the principles of economic exchange. For example, employees expect to receive payment for the work they perform. In contrast, relational contracts involve expectations of mutual trust and respect as well as expectations that each party may take for granted, such as good faith and fair treatment. For instance, employees expect their employer to communicate honestly with them (MacNeil, 1985; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994).

A violation of the psychological contract occurs when one party in the contractual relationship perceives that the other party has failed to fulfill the expectations and obligations of the contract (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). Studies have revealed that most employees perceive that their employers violate the expectations they formed at the beginning of their employment (Purvis & Cropley, 2003; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). For example, a longitudinal study investigating the occurrence of psychological contract violations among management graduates revealed that the majority of the graduates (54.8%) reported that their expectations were violated by their employers (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994).

Violations of an employee’s psychological contract can result in negative consequences for the organisation, including increased absenteeism and turnover. Furthermore, employees who perceive that their psychological contract with their employer has been violated frequently report lower levels of job satisfaction, organisational commitment and trust of their employer in comparison with employees who perceive that their psychological contract is intact (Purvis & Cropley, 2003; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). The negative consequences of psychological contract violations are similar to the negative effects of workplace bullying on both the employee and the organisation (Ayoko et al., 2003; Bjorkqvist et al., 1994; Einarsen & Raknes, 1997; Leymann, 1990; Price-Spratlen, 1995; Vartia & Hyyti, 2002). The perceived negativity associated with workplace bullying may be due, in part, to perceptions by the target that the employer has violated the psychological contract by failing to protect the target from negative treatment in the workplace. This proposition is supported by the multitude of research and victim accounts which indicate that many, if not most targets of workplace bullies feel that their employers did not do enough to protect them and to assist in dealing effectively with the bully (McCarthy, 2001).

Beyond issues of duty of care, another reason why employees perceive that their employers do not do enough to protect them from bullying may stem from the fact that each party to the psychological contract holds a different definition of workplace bullying. Given the variability in definitions of workplace bullying in use by researchers, practitioners, unions and organisations, and the absence of agreed definitions of workplace bullying in workplace anti-harassment policies, it is likely that every employee has a unique personal definition of workplace bullying. If both parties to a psychological contract hold contrary or conflicting definitions of workplace bullying, targets who perceive that their employer does not recognize a perpetrator’s actions as bullying may be more susceptible to negative effects of bullying.

3.2. Study aims

The key aim of this study was to investigate the extent to which the criteria perceived to be central to definitions of workplace bullying by a diverse group of lay participants coincided with criteria appearing in most operational definitions of workplace bullying used by researchers and practitioners. A second aim of this investigation was to determine whether lay participants identified other criteria within their definitions of workplace bullying in addition to those most commonly used in contemporary operational definitions of workplace bullying.

In line with the finding that many employees who experience frequent and persistent bullying behaviours at work fail to self-identify as bullied, it is proposed that the discrepancy between experience and labelling is partially attributable to the gap between criteria in personal, lay definitions of bullying and the criteria contained in operational definitions of workplace bullying. Specifically, it is proposed that employees will not label their negative workplace experiences as bullying if the definition of workplace bullying presented to them, either in workplace harassment policies or in research studies, does not coincide with their personal definition of workplace bullying. Therefore, we hypothesised that participants’ lay definitions of workplace bullying would include only some of the essential and non-essential definitional features drawn from current operational definitions of workplace bullying. We further hypothesised that participants’ lay definitions of workplace bullying would contain additional definitional features not common within current operational definitions of workplace bullying.
4. Method

4.1. Participants

The research participants were 1095 adults recruited from a pool of first year university students, organisations, unions, and through advertisements on the World Wide Web. Of the 1095 participants who completed the study and composed a definition of workplace bullying, approximately two-thirds (66.8%) were female and one third (33%) were male. The age range of the participants spanned more than 50 years (16 to 69 years). Over half of the participants were under the age of 25 years. The mean age of the sample was 30.13 years (SD = 13.33).

The majority of the participants were Australian (59%), followed by participants from Canada (13.2%), participants from the United States (n=60, 7.8%) and participants from Great Britain (n=29, 3.7%). Other participants were recruited from countries throughout Europe (2.3%), Asia (7.9%), Africa (0.7%) and South America (0.1%). In total, 52 nationalities were represented by the participants in this study.

The organisational background of the participants was diverse. One-third of participants (31.2%) were employed full-time, one-fifth (19.2%) were employed part-time, one-fifth (18.3%) worked on a casual/contract basis and one-tenth (1.1%) described themselves as self-employed. Approximately one-third of participants were unemployed. One-fifth of participants (18.3%) were full-time university students, one-tenth (11.3%) simply described themselves as “unemployed,” and less than 1% (0.5%) were retired.

Overall, participants’ workplace tenure ranged from 1 month to 45 years. The average length of employment or service at the participants’ current place of employment was five years (SD = 6.77 years). When asked to specify their position in the organisation, the majority of participants (76%) described themselves as workers and approximately one-sixth (17.8%) were employed in middle management. A small percentage of respondents (3.8%) occupied senior management roles or were self-employed or self-managed (2.2%). The majority of the employed participants indicated that their main business was within the industries of education/research/childcare (17.4%), health (17.3%) and retail (16.4%). Many other professional categories were represented, including computer/IT (3.5%), banking/finance (2.2%), manufacturing/production (1.6%), and human resources (1.4%).

With respect to their educational background, the majority of the participants indicated that they had completed high school or the equivalent (52.5%). Slightly more than one-fifth (23.2%) reported that they had completed an undergraduate degree, and fewer than 15% of the participants (13.3%) had achieved a postgraduate degree. Less than 10% of the remaining participants indicated that they had completed a trade (7.2%) or some grade school (3%).

4.2. Materials and procedure

Participants completed a 30 minute, five section survey (A–E), in English, on line or by pencil-and-paper on the topic of workplace bullying. Questions within each section were preceded by instructions on how to complete that section. The survey included many additional questions that are not addressed in this article, including information about participants’ personal experience with workplace bullying and their opinions about why workplace bullying occurs. Only participant responses to Question One, Section E will be reported here. In this question, participants were asked to define workplace bullying in their own words: “What is your definition of workplace bullying?” No definition or explanation of workplace bullying was provided elsewhere in the survey (Saunders, 2006).

Two raters, the principal investigator and a psychology student volunteer who was blind to the purpose of the experiment, independently scored the definitions composed by participants. Frequency counts were made to determine how often participants mentioned the five conventional definitional components common to current operational definitions of workplace bullying, i.e., “(1) targets experience negative behaviour; (2) behaviours are experienced persistently; (3) targets experience some harm, either psychological or physical; (4) targets perceive they have less power than the bully and, thus have difficulty defending themselves; and (5) targets label themselves “bullied” (Rayner & Keashly, 2004, p. 273) and other definitional criteria, e.g., intent and behaviour that violates a standard of appropriate workplace behaviour. Analysis revealed that inter-rater reliability was satisfactory (.91).
5. Results

Overall, both of the hypotheses were supported. Definitions of workplace bullying composed by the lay participants reflected all five definitional components used in current research and by organisations. Stronger support was found for some definitional components than others. Participants most frequently included two of the five core criteria within their personal definitions of workplace bullying: (a) bullying involves the perpetration of a negative behaviour and (b) bullying is the perpetration of a behaviour that causes some form of harm to the target. Relatively few participants indicated that a power imbalance must exist between the perpetrator and the target for the interaction to comprise an example of bullying or that the behaviour perpetrated must occur frequently and persistently. None of the participants specifically indicated that the labelling of oneself as bullied was critical in defining an experience as bullying.

Lay participants included two components within their definitions of workplace bullying that were not included in the professional core elements of bullying. First, a substantial number of participants indicated that bullying involves acts that violate the way they expect to be treated in a professional workplace. Second, approximately one fifth of the participants indicated that bullying behaviour had to be deliberate and purposeful on behalf of the perpetrator. Several participants stated that bullying involves acts disrespectful of the target and behaviours that are unethical and unprofessional. Table 1 summarises participant endorsement of each of the major professional definitional criteria and the additional criteria included by lay participants in their definitions. Table 2 details how frequently each of the definitional criteria were endorsed together in participant definitions of bullying.

5.1. The perpetration of a negative behaviour

Many participants defined workplace bullying by listing several specific workplace behaviours that they perceived typified bullying. For instance, one participant defined workplace bullying as “Verbal abuse, offensive language, offensive words regarding ethnicity, spreading rumours about a co-worker, excluding someone from “the group,” continuously putting someone down or making derogatory comments about a person’s appearance or performance.” Other participants defined workplace bullying on a general behavioural level: “Something that someone can physically or verbally do to another employee to make them feel uncomfortable, hurt, insulted. It can even be silent, just by staring. Anything that can be received in a negative manner, not only by higher authority but also other same ranked employees.” Overall, results of the content analysis indicated that the vast majority of participants (98.3%) mentioned that the target must experience some form of negative behaviour in order for that behaviour to qualify as bullying.

5.2. Negative effects of workplace bullying

A substantial number of participants (86.3%) composed definitions that specified that the target must experience some form of harm or hurt as a result of exposure to the behaviour for the interaction to qualify as bullying. Examples illustrative of this criterion include: “When another person goes out of his way to cause an individual psychological or physical discomfort, or whose behaviour causes the target of their actions to be unable to perform his job satisfactorily;” “Any act that may threaten your physical or psychological well-being in an effort to do a job or task that you have been
employed to do;” and “Anything that makes one unhappy, uncomfortable or upset.” In many respects, this criterion is analogous to a criterion of severity, with the qualification that the severity is addressed from the standpoint of the target.

5.3. Unprofessional conduct

An important theme that emerged in lay definitions of workplace bullying was that this conduct violated expectations of how employees should be treated by their fellow employees (25.5%). For instance, one participant defined workplace bullying as: “Actions by a person or persons towards another that cause humiliation, stress and degrading of the person. These actions are unwarranted, unethical and are not conducive toward making a harmonious
workplace or to encouraging healthy change if needed of that individual.” Likewise, another participant defined workplace bullying as: “Violation of my rights to get my job done efficiently, without undue distress caused by the behaviour of others.”

Furthermore, several participants explicitly classified bullying behaviours as unprofessional. For example, one participant defined workplace bullying as: “Unfair and unprofessional treatment in the workplace by an employer or employee.” Similarly, another participant stated workplace bullying was: “Unprofessional behaviour which is denigrating or causes the workplace environment to be strained.”

Additionally, several participants defined bullying as behaviour that is disrespectful of the target. Examples of participant definitions that specified the criterion of a violation of respectful workplace conduct include: “Workplace bullying is where the employees are not given the appropriate respect or rights…;” “Being subjected to unfair and unreasonable practices, treated without courtesy and respect;” “Whenever I am treated with disrespect by others;” and “Not being treated with respect and consideration by coworkers and employer. Every employee should be treated equally.”

5.4. Intent

Several participants (21.4%) indicated that the bully had to deliberately target another for the behaviour to qualify as bullying. The importance of the criterion of intent was clearly demonstrated in a number of participant definitions of workplace bullying: “Any behaviour which is geared towards making you feel or look less important or competent than you are. It is an intentional humiliation;” and “When people are made to feel uncomfortable intentionally by another colleague in the workplace.” The definitional component of intent was also alluded to in the wording of some participant definitions. For example, one participant defined workplace bullying as: “A deliberate and systematic attempt to lower the self esteem of another individual through words and actions.” Similarly, another participant defined workplace bullying as “People going out of their way to make you feel bad. People repeatedly doing this to you.”

5.5. Perception of powerlessness

In contrast to operational definitions of workplace bullying used by researchers and practitioners, only a small percentage of participants specified that the behaviour must involve some form of power imbalance to qualify as bullying (15.2%). When the criterion of power imbalance was included in participant definitions it usually referred to the concept of formal power. That is, participants perceived bullying as negative behaviour being perpetrated by someone in a more senior role than the target, and the powerlessness or vulnerability associated with being bullied stemmed directly from the formal power held by the bully. For example, one participant defined workplace bullying as: “…any situation where there is an imbalance of power and it is used negatively so that you cannot retaliate or stand up for yourself because of the status of the bullier”. Another participant defined workplace bullying as: “When someone in a higher position is condescending, making smart arse remarks, criticising your work, which was uncalled for in front of many people.” Likewise, another participant defined workplace bullying as: “I think bullying is not just targeting one employee. A manager can be bullying a group of their employees. So especially when bullied by a person who is superior to you, you feel that there is nothing you can do and feel helpless.”

Some participants indicated that bullies may possess forms of power other than formal power that they can be use to increase the power imbalance of the interaction, thereby leading their targets to perceive themselves as defenceless. For example, one participant defined workplace bullying as: “Using a position of power, either formal or social, to belittle, humiliate or extort others.” Likewise, another participant defined workplace bullying as: “…when someone uses their power (either from their position in the hierarchy, access to resources or even physical strength/size) to intimidate someone and make their life miserable.”

5.6. Persistence

Despite the inclusion of the criterion of persistence within researcher definitions of workplace bullying, only a relatively small percentage of participants specified that the adverse behaviour must occur frequently and persistently to qualify as bullying (14.7%). Examples of participant definitions that included the criterion of persistence include:
“Repeated unreasonable behaviour directed toward a staff member or group of staff that creates a risk to health and safety;” and “…when a member within the organisation embarrasses, threatens and makes rude remarks about you repeatedly....”

In contrast to the views of many workplace bullying researchers, a number of participants indicated that a single instance of negative conduct qualifies as bullying. For instance, one participant defined bullying as: “When an employee is made to feel uncomfortable, unsafe or unhappy in the workplace; sometimes this only happens once, sometimes it is constant.” Similarly, another definition provided by a participant defined workplace bullying as: “Where someone experiences negative acts by one or more people that results in a feeling of anxiety, fear and humiliation and it affects your happiness and productivity at work. I do not believe that bullying has to occur over a certain period of time, the severity of one instance can result in this feeling.”

5.7. Labelling the negative experience as bullying

None of the participants specifically indicated within their definitions that a target must feel bullied before the experience qualifies as one of bullying. Nonetheless, a handful of participants composed definitions that discussed the importance of individual perception in how targets react to and label their bullying experiences. One participant, for instance defined workplace bullying as: “The intention of person(s) to make others feel uncomfortable and, therefore, can influence their work performance. However, the intensity of bullying is measured at the receiving end (or, the felt discomfort). The intensity may be very different to different people at different times, depending on many variables.” Similarly, another participant stated: “Bullying is incredibly hard to define. It is an abstract concept so what I consider bullying may not strictly comply with another person’s definition. I am sure that someone or another would say that I have bullied people but it is all completely unintentional.”

6. Discussion

The key aim of this study was to determine whether definitional criteria, both essential and non-essential, comprising current operational definitions, used in both scientific research and in practice, coincided with definitional criteria featured in layperson definitions of workplace bullying. Overall, lay definitions of workplace bullying included two of the five formal definitional criteria: the occurrence of a negative behaviour and a behaviour that inflicts harm on the target with current operational definitions of workplace bullying. Relatively few lay definitions mentioned criteria of persistence, frequency and power imbalance, and none of the participants specified that targets must self-label their experiences as bullying.

Lay participants frequently specified definitional criteria that are not often included in formal operational definitions of workplace bullying, such as behaviour that is perpetrated intentionally, and behaviour that comprises inappropriate workplace conduct. Although there is some overlap between workplace bullying definitions currently in use in the scientific, professional and legal communities, and lay definitions of workplace bullying, the differences may have a significant influence on the labelling of bullying interactions and the negative effects of bullying.

Differences in criteria between lay and workplace definitions presented to individuals within workplace harassment policies and in surveys of workplace bullying incidence may lead to underreporting of the occurrence of bullying in a workplace. Research has demonstrated that there is a difference between the number of employees who are exposed to frequent and persistent workplace bullying behaviour and the number of employees who self-report that they have been bullied (Jennifer et al., 2003; Salin, 2001). Past researchers have proposed that one reason for this gap is that employees may not label themselves bullied despite being frequently exposed to bullying behaviour if their personal definition of workplace bullying does not coincide with definitions presented in incidence surveys. The present study provides support for this proposition by demonstrating the extent to which individual definitions of workplace bullying vary from current operational definitions of workplace bullying.

Organisations that have a workplace harassment policy that includes the five criteria most common in professional definitions of workplace bullying may risk a reduction in the reporting of bullying interactions by their employees. For example, employees whose personal definitions differ from those advocated by their organisation may be reluctant to report an experience of bullying for fear of not being taken seriously if the interaction that they define as bullying does not meet all the definitional elements contained in the workplace policy definition. Bullying definitions used in organisational settings should take into consideration the wide range of definitional criteria that may comprise their
employees’ personal definitions of workplace bullying. For example, in addition to providing an overarching definition of bullying, organisations should include examples of bullying behaviour, both direct and subtle, to ensure that their definition more closely coincides with that of their employees. A workplace policy that mentions the importance of professional and respectful behaviour in the workplace may be helpful to employees who are evaluating and responding to workplace bullying behaviour.

The possible underreporting of workplace bullying behaviour as a result of differing definitions as to what workplace bullying entails can have serious consequences for organisations where the bullying occurs. Discrepancies between organisational and employee definitions of workplace bullying can also influence the negative effects of bullying on both the target and the organisation. The psychological contract between employer and employee may contain a number of expectations regarding the working conditions that an employee expects, such as a professional workplace free of disrespectful and harassing behaviour. Employees may also expect their employers to protect and assist them when inappropriate workplace behaviour, such as bullying, occurs. The finding that lay participants regard disrespectful workplace behaviour as a form of bullying supports the proposition that employees expect their workplace to conform to certain standards regarding appropriate workplace behaviour.

Given the costly consequences of both bullying and the violation of psychological contracts, organisations are well-advised to consider the expectations that their employees may hold about the inappropriateness of bullying behaviour in the workplace and the degree of responsibility placed on their employer to prevent bullying. According to Adams and Bray (1992), “effective protection of staff starts with a clear definition and understanding of the risks faced and a strong commitment to dealing with them” (p. 48). Consequently, organisations need to ensure that a clear definition of bullying and appropriate workplace conduct is presented to their employees both at the beginning of and throughout their employment. Additionally, organisations should have a publicly known and accessible procedure that is closely adhered to when bullying does occur to ensure that they take bullying claims seriously and actively respond to claims of bullying. To further ensure that employee expectations are met, it may be beneficial to develop bullying prevention procedures and policies with employee input gathered through surveys, focus groups, and exit interviews.

Organisational research has demonstrated that training is important and beneficial in showing that an employer is serious about preventing prohibited conduct (Gutek, 1997; Hill & Phillips, 1997). In other words, training efforts can be effective in establishing a workplace climate of intolerance for harassment and bullying (Stockdale, Bisom-Rapp, O’Connor, & Gutek, 2004). Consequently, in order to further ensure that they are meeting the expectations of their employees regarding their provision of a professional workplace, organisations should implement training programs that define and illustrate what inappropriate and bullying behaviour entails and that assure employees that bullying will not be tolerated, and that all claims of workplace bullying will be treated seriously.

6.1. Limitations and avenues for future research

One potential limitation of the present study is the nature of the sample. Participants who responded to the recruitment advertisements may have had a vested interest in the topic. In other words, a high proportion of the participants may themselves have been targets of workplace bullies. If their definitions are shaped by their experience as targets, and are not shared by perpetrators and observers of bullying in the workplace, these lay definitions may not generalise to those groups. However, to date, research on bullying has not investigated systematic differences in the perception of bullying by targets, bullies versus observers.

A large number of the participants indicated they are based in countries where bullying is not the term used most commonly to describe this form of workplace harassment (i.e., the US, Germany). In this study, participants were specifically asked to define ‘workplace bullying.’ It is not known whether participants, from countries where ‘bullying’ is not commonly used, would have composed the same definition if asked to define ‘mobbing’ or ‘emotional abuse’ or ‘workplace harassment’. The definitions composed by these participants, as a result, may not be an accurate reflection of what they consider to be workplace bullying, according to the terminology they are most accustomed to. Future studies should expand on the findings of this investigation by asking employees in different countries to compose definitions of bullying using the terminology most relevant to their workplace culture. This will be useful in determining whether the various terms used to describe this phenomenon are interchangeable and whether a universal definition of workplace bullying is a realistic goal. It may be that there are vast geographical and cultural differences on how inappropriate workplace behaviour is defined and labelled that must be accounted for when developing policies and legal definitions of workplace bullying.
The emergence of the themes of fairness and respect as integral components of layperson definitions of workplace bullying should also be further investigated. Workplace bullying behaviour has frequently been conceptualised as one form of negative workplace behaviour within a spectrum ranging from workplace incivility to workplace violence (Baron & Neuman, 1998). Future investigations should examine whether participants actually consider fairness and respect to be central components of workplace bullying or whether they apply these themes generally to all forms of inappropriate workplace behaviour. For example, it may be interesting to ask participants to define workplace bullying as well as other forms of negative workplace behaviour, such as ‘incivility’ and ‘violence’ and compare the definitional components that emerge to determine whether there are themes that differentiate these behaviours from one another and whether there are themes common to all forms of inappropriate workplace behaviour. It may also be interesting to ask participants to label a variety of negative workplace behaviours as either bullying or simply disrespectful and rude to determine whether all bullying behaviours are considered forms of workplace incivility or whether there are certain behaviours that are recognised as distinctly bullying and whether incivility and bullying should be considered as integrated concepts.

7. Conclusion

The occurrence of bullying in the workplace can have serious and costly consequences for both the target and the organisation. As a consequence, organisations should ensure that they do everything within their means to effectively prevent its occurrence and assist employees who have been bullied. This study demonstrated that definitions of workplace bullying, prevalent in the scientific and professional communities, differ from employees’ definitions in several respects. Specifically, it was shown that lay participants greatly value a professional workplace free of inappropriate, unprofessional behaviour that they deem harassing and bullying in nature, a criterion of bullying not accounted for in most contemporary definitions of workplace bullying. By taking this disparity into account, employers can better address episodes of workplace bullying by taking into consideration their employees’ definitions of bullying and their expectations of how bullying should be handled.

References


