The Impact of Workplace Bullying and Harassment on Health and Well-Being of Staff in the Irish Higher Education Sector

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Background

Workplace bullying is an especially detrimental form of negative behaviour incorporating a range of aggressive interpersonal behaviours, for example verbal abuse, harassment based on ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation and micro-political game playing for personal gain. Many estimates of prevalence across occupations, sectors and cultures have been published, and while cautioning against comparisons without due consideration of methodological moderators an average prevalence of 14.6% is reported. The educational sector and specifically Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), are at risk for higher than average levels of exposure.

The impact of workplace bullying on the health of workers is unequivocal; meta-analyses of cross-sectional and longitudinal studies demonstrate a robust relationship between the experience of being bullied and compromised health. Demonstrated across diverse occupations, sectors and cultures, this is one of the most well-established findings in the workplace bullying literature.

There are relatively few qualitative studies specifically addressing the impact of workplace bullying on health, although negative impacts inevitably emerge in qualitative studies exploring the experience of being bullied, for example lowered self-confidence, feelings of self-contempt, guilt, isolation, vulnerability, and a challenging of targets' basic assumptions about themselves and others including identity disruption. In particular, the specific impact on health in HEIs is under-researched.

The role of specific organisational factors in the erosion of health is the focus of enquiry in this study. Specifically, the interplay of specific individual level factors such as the undermining of professional identity and broader organisational factors such as competitiveness and performativity in HEIs will be explored. Further, the proposed study will provide an opportunity to explore the under-researched role of the failure in many organisations, including HEIs, to adequately address bullying incidents in the experience of reduced health.

Aims and Objectives

This study aims to explore the health consequences of workplace bullying and harassment in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Ireland

Objectives

- To explore the way in which health is affected by staff in HEIs who have experienced workplace bullying and harassment, including trajectory and perceived impact
- To explore if the experience of being bullied impacts professional identity
- To explore the role of organisational context on the health impact of workplace bullying and harassment
- To explore the role of organisational processes/systems (Occupational Health, HR, EAP, as appropriate) in the context of the impact on health.

Design and Methods

The study is a non-experimental observational study, which will employ a qualitative interpretive methodology involving one-to-one interviews with self-selecting participants. These participants will be current or (recently) former members of HEI staff in Ireland, who have experienced workplace bullying and/or harassment while working in the HEI.

As the study does not align precisely with the foundational qualitative approaches of phenomenology, ethnography or grounded theory we identify it as a generic qualitative approach underpinned by Caelli et al.'s criteria.

Sampling and Recruitment

Based on Malterud's recommendations for sample size, we will attempt a sample of 16 -20 participants, while ensuring diversity in respect of gender and worker type (e.g. professional staff/academic staff). The sample will be self-selecting HEI staff members who have experienced workplace bullying and/or harassment, within higher education. The recruitment strategy will target persons who currently work or have recently worked (thus allowing for persons who have exited their job due to bullying) in higher education institutions; academic staff, researchers, and professional staff, including Human Resources Professionals (HRP) and senior management. The study will be open to permanent staff, precarious staff, and untenured staff. In the interests of homogeneity, the study will not include experiences of student-to-student bullying or staff-to-student bullying.

There are 22 Higher Education Institutions in Ireland. Approaching each institution to seek permission to interview is not practicable and could potentially skew the sample in the direction of institutions that have a degree of openness about the problems of workplace bullying and harassment. Further, bearing in mind known aspects of the experience of workplace bullying such as fear of exposure to further bullying, there is a risk that if prospective participants perceive the recruitment to be taking place through their employer, and even with a commitment of anonymity, they may fear identification and reprisal, and therefore exclude themselves from the study.

Therefore, we propose to recruit potential self-selecting participants via social media, specifically, twitter. A study-specific twitter account will be set up and an invitation issued (with a link to an MS form which will provide a participant information sheet and participant consent form. Consenting participants will be directed to the PI's email address.

Results

Data analysis will follow Braun and Clarke's six step process. Transcripts will be read and re-read by a minimum of two team members/researchers. Each transcript will be summarised, drawing on field notes as appropriate to achieve data familiarisation, and will be checked for coherence, consistency, and distinctiveness. The data will be coded and codes re constructed within and across transcripts into themes. Themes will be reviewed, defined, and named. Relationships or connections between themes will be mapped as appropriate.