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# Bullying behind bars: a preliminary study of human resources professionals and workplace bullying in corrections

Matthew E. Ritzman

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – *The purpose of this paper is to investigate the prevalence of workplace bullying reported to human resources (HR) professionals in corrections. It compared the prevalence of bullying reported to HR professionals to the prevalence of self-reported workplace bullying found in the study by Einarsen et al. (2009).*

**Design/methodology/approach** – *In total, 75 HR professionals completed the modified version of the Negative Acts Questionnaire – Revised (The Bergen Bullying Research Group, 2009) that consists of three subscales measuring work-related bullying, person-related bullying, and physically intimidating bullying. Participants indicated how often certain types of workplace bullying were reported to them. The prevalence of bullying reported to HR professionals was then compared to the prevalence of self-reported workplace bullying found in the comparison study.*

**Findings** – *The findings of the study were statistically significant and demonstrated that more workplace bullying was reported to HR professionals in corrections than was self-reported in the comparison study. The results show statistical significance in the scale as a whole, in the person-related bullying subscale, and in the physical intimidation subscale.*

**Practical implications** – *HR professionals might be more likely to accurately report workplace bullying behavior that has been reported to them, as opposed to employees who directly experienced bullying. Organizations might benefit from having designated HR professionals or some other types of independent services for reporting of workplace bullying*

**Originality/value** – *A significant amount of workplace bullying research has focussed on causes, symptoms, and consequences of the phenomenon that can be generalized across a variety of occupations. This general research has advanced understanding of the topic. However, there are limitations to this approach. Generalized literature should also be complemented by research considering factors, issues, and concerns specific to particular working environments to develop more meaningful knowledge. To this end, this research focussed on workplace bullying in corrections organizations.*

**Keywords** *Systems theory, Prison, Human resources, Corrections, Workplace bullying, Human performance technology*

**Paper type** *Research paper*

## Introduction

Workplace bullying has been found to be a significant problem which has a negative impact on employees and organizations. It has been suggested that human resources (HR) professionals are important employees in addressing workplace bullying (Boyd and Carden, 2010; Glendinning, 2001; Lewis and Rayner, 2003; Mathieson *et al.*, 2006; Namie and Namie, 2003; Salin, 2008) and that they might have far-reaching involvement in bullying situations (Boyd and Carden, 2010;

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Cowan, 2012; Ferris, 2004; Lewis and Rayner, 2003). Once bullying is reported to them, HR professionals face a challenge of adequately addressing it by balancing the needs of various organizational members in opposing roles (Harrington *et al.*, 2012). Targets of workplace bullying frequently perceive policies that HR practitioners use to address workplace bullying as inconsistent, unfair, and erratic (Harrington *et al.*, 2012; Rayner, 2009; Tracy *et al.*, 2006).

Research has not settled on one definition of workplace bullying. Definitions generally focus on several essential criteria to identify workplace bullying: frequency, persistence, intent, and power disparity (Lutgen-Sandvik *et al.*, 2007; Rayner *et al.*, 2002; Samnani and Singh, 2012; Saunders *et al.*, 2007). Fox and Stallworth (2010) suggest these definitional requirements establish bullying as a regular and ongoing experience. Workplace bullying tactics may not appear serious to outside observers. However, what makes workplace bullying so damaging is the fact that it involves repeated bullying tactics that last over longer periods of time (Keashly, 2010). Keashly and Neuman (2002) reported the frequency of exposure to bullying has been directly linked to negative impacts on the target's health, job attitudes, and productivity. Persistence of bullying behavior distinguishes ordinary disagreements or random acts of abuse from prolonged periods of calculated mistreatment (Leymann, 1996; Nielsen *et al.*, 2010). One incident of direct or indirect aggression can be very harmful for a target, but it is the totality of the repeated patterns of behavior that defines bullying and makes it so damaging (Leymann, 1990, 1996).

A significant amount of workplace bullying research has focussed on causes, symptoms, and consequences that can be generalized across a variety of occupations (Glaso *et al.*, 2011). However, it is also important to consider factors that contribute to bullying in specific working environments (De Croon *et al.*, 2002; Glaso *et al.*, 2011; McClenahan *et al.*, 2007; Sparks and Cooper, 1999). According to Mikkelsen and Einarsen (2001), research in specific employment fields can provide important information to specific aspects of workplace bullying. This may result in more effective anti-bullying policies and intervention strategies (Glaso *et al.*, 2007; Pawlowski *et al.*, 2007). Zapf *et al.* (2003) explained how bullying varies across different sectors of employment because of differences in job characteristics such as the content of work duties and varying levels of personal involvement and social interaction required of employees.

Thus far, it has been demonstrated that HR professionals might have an important role in addressing workplace bullying. However, most research on workplace bullying has been devoted to investigating the experiences of workplace bullies and targets with little consideration paid to HR professionals (Cowan, 2012; Salin, 2008, 2009). The present study adds to limited research in this area by utilizing systems theory, as a part of human performance technology.

Considering a systems view of organizations is essential when addressing performance issues because organizations are comprised of functionally related components that impact the performance of all other systems within the organization (Pershing, 2006). Different parts of the system must work together toward a common goal. The effectiveness of each separate unit is dependent on how it fits into the whole system and vice versa (Pershing, 2006). A specific focus of this study is to measure one unit of the system, namely HR professionals in corrections. In doing so, the present study investigates the prevalence of workplace bullying reported to HR professionals in corrections. It compares the prevalence of bullying reported to the HR professionals in this study to the prevalence of self-reported workplace bullying found in the study by Einarsen *et al.* (2009).

## Method

### *Sample*

This study was confined to members of an international association of training professionals in the field of corrections. Members of the same association's LinkedIn group were also invited to participate. Participants were required to be at least 18 years old. A total of 82 respondents responded to the age qualification question with 81 respondents answering they were over the age of 18.

Respondents were required to select at least one relevant HR responsibility they perform in their present job to participate in the survey. Five respondents did not select a relevant job

responsibility and were not permitted to answer any further questions. An additional eight respondents did not answer this question and their responses were not included in the data set. A total of 75 respondents met the criteria to be included in the survey. Of those who were selected for the sample, some respondents did not answer some, or all of the survey questions. Given the small sample size, this study should be considered preliminary.

### **Measures**

The Negative Acts Questionnaire – Revised (NAQ-R) (The Bergen Bullying Research Group) was used to collect the data on workplace bullying that was reported to HR professionals. The NAQ-R consists of 22 questions and utilizes a threshold of four or more affirmative answers to determine if work place bullying has taken place. The questionnaire does not use the words “bullying” or “harassment.” Rather, it asks participants to identify if they have experienced bullying tactics (Einarsen and Hoel, 2001; Nielsen *et al.*, 2008; Vogelpohl, 2011). The instrument used in the present study was modified to ask HR professionals about workplace bullying that has been reported to them by other employees. Therefore, the modified NAQ-R did not ask HR professionals whether they have been subjected to bullying themselves. For each item, respondents could indicate how often workplace bullying was reported to them. The response options were: “Never,” “Now and then,” “Monthly,” “Weekly,” and “Daily.”

Overall, the 22 NAQ-R items are divided into three subscales, namely, the: work-related subscale, person-related subscale, and physically intimidating subscale. Items included in each subscale are provided in Tables II-IV. Psychometric properties of the NAQ-R have been thoroughly investigated (Einarsen and Raknes, 1997; Einarsen *et al.*, 2009).

### **Procedure**

Each member of an international association of training professionals in the field of corrections was sent an e-mail inviting them to participate. Members of the same association’s LinkedIn group were also invited to participate through the LinkedIn group. Each person who responded to the questionnaire also completed an informed consent form, outlining the purpose of the study, description of the research procedure, potential risks and benefits and confidentiality. The informed consent form explained that confidentiality and anonymity would be preserved for all participants in the study. By clicking on the link provided in the e-mail, or copying and pasting the link into the internet browser, participants could access the questionnaire. The questionnaires were completed online.

### **Approach to analysis**

The study compared the prevalence of workplace bullying reported to HR professionals in corrections to the rate of bullying found in organizations outside of correctional services in the comparison study by Einarsen *et al.* (2009). The sample in the comparison study comprised of 5,288 employees from 70 organizations within private, public, and voluntary employers across Great Britain. An independent samples *t*-test was used to determine whether the difference was significant. Comparing a smaller sample size such as the one in the present study ( $n = 75$ ) with a much larger sample from the comparison study ( $n = 5,288$ ) is difficult. Therefore, prior to conducting a *t*-test, unequal variances in samples were adjusted using Welch’s method.

### **Results**

Table I summarizes the job responsibilities that were held by HR professionals included in the sample. In total, 14 respondents were excluded from the data analysis because they did not meet the criteria required to be included in the sample while completing the questionnaire. These fourteen respondents were included as part of the missing system calculations in the data analysis. The most common responsibilities held by HR professionals were: training employees ( $n = 55$ , 74.3 percent), communicating policy to employees ( $n = 47$ , 63.5 percent), writing employee performance evaluations ( $n = 44$ , 59.5 percent), training managers ( $n = 42$ ,

**Table I** Job responsibilities

	<i>n</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Training employees	55	74.3
Training managers	42	56.8
Evaluating training initiatives	39	52.7
Employee recruitment and selection	25	33.8
Employee termination	18	24.3
Policy writing	36	48.6
Policy application	42	56.8
Communicating policy to employees	47	63.5
Involvement in the employee discipline process	31	41.9
Investigating reports of work place bullying	27	36.5
Responding to findings of work place bullying	23	31.1
Circulating, grading, or coding surveys to gauge the organizational climate	14	18.9
Circulating, grading, or coding employee and management interviews to gauge the organizational climate	13	17.6
Responding to employee grievances and/or complaints	29	39.2
Evaluating employee performance	42	56.8
Writing employee performance evaluations	44	59.5
Communicating performance standards to employees	36	48.6
Conducting exit interviews with employees leaving the organization	16	21.6
Providing assistance to employees who report being targets of work place mistreatment	23	31.1
Other human resource functions that are not listed – please specify	6	8.1
I do not perform any of the tasks listed	5	6.8

**Notes:**  $n = 74$ . Eight respondents did not answer this question and their responses were not included in the data set

56.8 percent), policy application ( $n = 42$ , 56.8 percent), and evaluating employees ( $n = 42$ , 56.8 percent). Specifically related to bullying, 36.5 percent ( $n = 27$ ) stated that they had responsibilities for investigating bullying reports, and 31.1 percent ( $n = 23$ ) stated that they had responsibilities for responding to work place bullying.

Tables II-IV demonstrates participants' answers regarding the frequency of workplace bullying that was reported to them across the 22 survey questions separated into three subscales. The first subscale comprises of seven items measuring work-related bullying. A distribution of participants' answers to seven items included in the first subscale is shown in Table II.

Einarsen *et al.* (2009) reported the mean percentage of work-related bullying as 13.78 of respondents who participated in their study.

The second subscale comprises of 12 items measuring person-related bullying. A distribution of participants' answers to 12 items included in the second subscale is shown in Table III. In the study by Einarsen *et al.* (2009) on average 14.51 percent of employees reported being targets of person-related bullying.

The third subscale comprises of three items measuring physically intimidating bullying. A distribution of participants' answers to items included in the third subscale is shown in Table IV. This could be compared to the study by Einarsen *et al.* (2009) where on average 3.88 percent employees reported physically intimidating bullying.

Table V reports results from independent samples *t*-tests which were conducted to determine whether there were significant differences between the bullying reported by employees in the Einarsen *et al.* (2009) study and the awareness about bullying reported by the current sample of HR professionals. Prior to conducting *t*-tests, the samples' unequal variances were adjusted using the Welch's method. As can be seen from Table V, HR professionals reported significantly more overall bullying that was reported to them, as well as significantly more person-related bullying and physically intimidating bullying they were aware of.

**Table II** Reported frequencies of work-related bullying

<i>Bullying tactic measured</i>	<i>Now and then</i>				
	<i>Never</i>	<i>Monthly</i>	<i>Weekly</i>	<i>Daily</i>	
Co-workers or superiors withheld information that effected their performance	13 25.0%	29 55.8%	3 5.8%	6 11.5%	1 1.9%
Being ordered to do work below what is in their job description	19 36.5%	23 44.2%	5 9.6%	4 7.7%	1 1.9%
Having their opinions and views ignored	12 23.1%	21 40.4%	11 21.2%	5 9.6%	3 5.8%
Being given tasks with unreasonable or impossible targets or deadlines	29 56.9%	13 25.5%	4 7.8%	3 5.9%	2 3.9%
Excessive monitoring of their work	21 40.4%	18 34.6%	2 3.8%	4 7.7%	7 13.5%
Pressure not to claim something which by right they are entitled	30 57.7%	12 23.1%	3 5.8%	2 3.8%	5 9.6%
Being exposed to an unmanageable workload	19 36.5%	20 38.5%	3 5.8%	5 9.6%	5 9.6%

**Notes:**  $n = 53$ . Percentages are based on non-missing observations. Values above percentages are frequency counts

**Table III** Reported frequencies of person-related bullying items

<i>Bullying tactic measured</i>	<i>Now and then</i>				
	<i>Never</i>	<i>Monthly</i>	<i>Weekly</i>	<i>Daily</i>	
Being humiliated or ridiculed in connection with their work	22 42.3%	20 38.5%	4 7.7%	5 9.6%	1 1.9%
Having key areas of responsibility removed or replaced with more trivial or unpleasant tasks	21 40.4%	20 38.5%	8 15.4%	2 3.8%	1 1.9%
Having gossip and rumors spread about them	11 21.2%	22 42.3%	10 19.2%	5 9.6%	4 7.7%
Being ignored, excluded or being isolated from others	13 25.0%	23 44.2%	7 13.5%	3 5.8%	6 11.5%
Having insulting or offensive remarks made about their personal habits and background, attitudes or private life	19 37.3%	20 39.2%	4 7.8%	5 9.8%	3 5.9%
Hints or signals from others they should quit their job	29 55.8%	15 28.8%	5 9.6%	2 3.8%	1 1.9%
Repeated reminders of their errors or mistakes	14 26.9%	22 42.3%	6 11.5%	7 13.5%	3 5.8%
Being ignored or facing a hostile reaction when they approach	22 42.3%	17 32.7%	7 13.5%	4 7.7%	2 3.8%
Persistent criticism of their work and effort	17 32.7%	19 36.5%	8 15.4%	7 13.5%	1 1.9%
Practical jokes carried out by people they don't get along with	32 61.5%	18 34.6%	1 1.9%	0 0.0%	1 1.9%
Having allegations made against them	20 38.5%	25 48.1%	4 7.7%	2 3.8%	1 1.9%
Being the subject of excessive teasing and sarcasm	24 46.2%	23 44.2%	2 3.8%	2 3.8%	1 1.9%

**Notes:**  $n = 53$ . Percentages are based on non-missing observations. Values above percentages are frequency counts

## Discussion

Significantly more overall, person-related and physically intimidating bullying was reported by HR professionals in corrections than self-reported in the comparison study. Similarly, some workplace bullying items were reported more often on a "daily" basis to HR professionals as

**Table IV** Reported frequencies of physically intimidating bullying

Bullying tactic measured	Now and then				
	Never	Monthly	Weekly	Daily	
Being shouted at or being the target of spontaneous anger	15 29.4%	30 58.8%	4 7.8%	1 2.0%	1 2.0%
Intimidating behavior such as finger-pointing, invasion of personal space, shoving, blocking/barring the way	34 66.7%	13 25.5%	1 2.0%	0 0.0%	3 5.9%
Threats of violence or physical abuse or actual abuse	42 80.8%	10 19.2%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%

**Notes:**  $n = 53$ . Percentages are based on non-missing observations. Values above percentages are frequency counts

**Table V** t-Tests comparing bullying reported by HR professionals to the comparison study

	Sample ( $n = 53$ )		Einarsen <i>et al.</i> (2009) ( $n = 5,288$ )		Mean diff.	SE mean diff.	t	df	p
	M	SD	M	SD					
NAQ-R scale total	41.7	17.22	31.88	10.15	9.837	2.39	4.11	51	< 0.001
Work-related bullying	14.04	6.36	14.51	5.04	0.470	0.86	0.53	51	0.58
Person-related bullying	23.67	9.49	13.78	5.2	9.890	1.32	7.48	51	< 0.001
Physically intimidated bullying	4.54	1.75	3.88	1.85	0.660	0.244	2.7	52	< 0.001

opposed to other organizational officials. Of all types of bullying investigated in this study, physical intimidating bullying was least often reported to HR professionals. This is consistent with previous research suggesting that workplace bullying is often a systematic pattern of subtle mistreatment which might not be immediately noticeable to other members of the organization (McKenna *et al.*, 2003; Neuman and Baron, 1998). Bullies typically avoid violence and aggressive physical behavior, as it is more evident and easier for others to detect and investigate. According to McKenna *et al.* (2003), workplace bullies rarely rely on one bullying type and usually do not resort to overt violence as they are aware it would likely lead to termination of their employment. Einarsen *et al.* (2009) reported the average conditional probability of respondents reporting physically intimidating bullying as 3 percent.

The results of this study suggest that HR professionals in corrections might have a different perspective on work place bullying than employees from the comparison study. The fact that significant differences were found on two out of three NAQ-R subscales might be explained by several reasons. First, it might be that HR professionals are more likely to accurately report bullying that was reported to them by other employees. Targets of workplace bullying may potentially under-report their direct experience of being bullied. This is in line with evidence about bullying targets having a tendency to under-report bullying (La Van and Martin, 2007, 2009). The literature describes a lack of reporting among targets to avoid the perceived role of a "victim" which usually fosters feelings of embarrassment, weakness, shame, and passivity (Einarsen *et al.*, 1994; Rayner *et al.*, 2002). Similarly, targets may under-report being bullied due to fear and concern that bullies would not face consequences or could retaliate against them (Dalton, 2007). There is also evidence that targets believe that reporting bullying would negatively impact their reputation within the organization (Ellis, 2009; Kieseker and Marchant, 1999; Rayner *et al.*, 2002; Vega and Comer, 2005).

Second, HR professionals might have inaccurate information about bullying in their correctional facility because workplace bullies may report bullying in order to further discredit, isolate, and undermine a target. Future research relying on self-reports should be conducted to examine this possibility. Third, it is possible that HR professionals in corrections had more knowledge about

bullying than employees in the comparison study. Einarsen *et al.* (2009) collected their data approximately five years ago. Since then, knowledge and awareness about workplace bullying have increased. This may have caused increased reporting of bullying in the HR sample. According to Salin (2008), awareness and knowledge of bullying at all levels within an organization help reduce recognition time, increase reporting, and prevent bullying situations from escalating. Increased education, awareness, and use of performance improvement interventions to address work place bullying may actually increase rates of bullying reported in research, as employees may now be more apt to recognize and report bullying.

Finally, methods employed in the current study differed from methods used in the comparison study. The fact that HR professionals were reporting bullying that was reported to them by other employees, not their own experiences of being bullied, might have influenced the results.

### *Limitations*

The perceptions of the HR professionals included in this study might not be the general perceptions of all HR professionals in corrections. Similarly, the NAQ-R assesses the frequency and duration of bullying behavior reported through official organizational channels. The instrument omits the measure of power imbalance between the target and bully, which is an identifying trait of workplace bullying. Another limitation of this study refers to the fact that HR professionals did not report if they experienced bullying. Rather, they were only asked about bullying that was reported to them by other employees, which might have been an inaccurate reflection of the real situation. Finally, not only was the sample size of this study small, but it was also compared to a much larger sample size which is not advisable. However, the Welch's method was used to try to compensate for differences in sample sizes.

### *Recommendations for future research*

This study concentrated on workplace bullying reported to HR professionals working in correctional settings. Given the small sample size, replicating this preliminary study by utilizing a larger sample may provide more generalizable results. As this study utilized systems theory to focus on HR professionals, the perspective was limited to those holding a HR or similar position. Future research could examine whether workplace bullying is also reported to other organizational representatives including supervisors, managers, and labor union officials. This may provide a broader view of reporting of bullying. Furthermore, utilizing systems theory to analyze other organizational subsystems to gain enhanced understanding on their role in addressing workplace bullying may be useful in developing interventions for combating workplace bullying within organizations.

### **Conclusion**

Correctional organizations should strive to provide a safe, efficient, and effective process for employees to report and address workplace bullying. This study provides a starting point for measuring the reporting of workplace bullying in corrections. As the study found that workplace bullying was reported more often to HR professionals than it was found to take place in the comparison study, further exploration of bullying reporting to HR professionals, and bullying in corrections would be beneficial.

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