

Exploring Workplace Bullying Through a Social Work Ethics-Informed Lens

Karla B. Horton, Ph.D.
Southern Illinois University
karla.horton@siu.edu

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Abstract

Workplace bullying is a well-researched topic and a rising phenomenon in academia. When this phenomenon occurs within the social work academy, it can be detrimental to teaching and learning, social work practice, and tenure-track faculty's research productivity. This paper will examine and define workplace bullying, as well as explore the implications it has on social work ethics and academia. Recommendations for practice, research, and policy are addressed.

Keywords: workplace bullying; tenure-track faculty; social work students; social work academia; social work values/ethics

Introduction

Workplace bullying is a phenomenon that has been well researched, and findings indicate that it is detrimental to both workers and the workplace. Hallberg and Strandmark (2006) found that workplace bullying is associated with physical and psychosomatic symptoms, as well as counterproductive behaviors in the workplace, such as purposely wasting company materials and supplies, purposely completing one's work incorrectly, and purposely damaging valuable company property (Ayoko, Callon, Hartel, 2003). The effects of workplace bullying are unique to each work setting, especially in academia. Most of the literature has focused on the helping professions—especially medicine, nursing, education, and social work—because they rely heavily on the workplace

for student training and professional socialization (Zapt, Einarsen, Hoel, & Vartia, 2003 as cited in Ferris & Kline, 2009). What distinguishes social work from other helping professions is a long-standing allegiance to a value-based mission and a distinct ethical framework (Reamer, 1993, p.39).

Schools of social work are teaching and learning environments for social work principles such as theory, evidence-based practice, policy, and research. Students, faculty, and internship supervisors are all active participants within the social work academy, and they are all responsible for upholding the National Association of Social Workers-Code of Ethics (NASW-COE). The NASW-COE specifies our responsibilities to our students, clients, colleagues, and practice settings. Its values include service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence. The code of ethics values are as follows (NASW Code Ethics, 2008):

- Service: to assist those in need and address social problems.
- Social justice: pursue social change, especially with the vulnerable and oppressed.
- Dignity and worth of the person: treat each person in a caring a respectful manner, mindful of individual differences and cultural and ethnic diversity.
- Importance of human relationships: relationships between and among

people are an important vehicle for change.

- Integrity: behaving in a trustworthy manner.
- Competence: aspire to contribute to the knowledge base of the profession.

Purpose

In the social work academy, the six NASW-COE values are important to teaching, learning, and practice. This paper will explore the connections between workplace bullying in the social work academy and the inherent contradictions that it poses to the NASW-COE. This discussion is guided by three assumptions from the scholarly literature on workplace bullying: first, workplace bullying affects organizational culture and climate; secondly, in the social work academy, social work students are trained using the NASW-COE; and lastly, workplace bullying amongst students, from faculty to students, and amongst faculty can negatively influence teaching, learning, and client care.

Workplace Bullying Defined

Matthiesen and Einarsen (2010) attempted to develop a nomenclature by defining nine different types of workplace bullying:

1. dispute-related bullying (developed from an interpersonal conflict, often involving social control reactions to the perceived wrongdoing);
2. predatory bullying (the target has personally done nothing provocative that may reasonably justify the behavior of the bully);
3. scapegoating (frustration is displaced on an available target which is seen to “deserve” it);
4. sexual harassment (a target is exposed to repeated and unwanted sexual attention by a more powerful and often older coworker or superior);

5. humor-oriented bullying (ridiculing, teasing, or interpersonal humor that is asymmetrical; person-oriented humor directed towards someone in an out-group position);
6. work-related stalking (can be defined as a course of conduct in which one individual inflicts upon another repeated unwanted intrusions and communications, to such an extent that the victim fears for their safety);
7. bullying of workplace newcomers (a rite of passage in which newcomers in the workplace are met with intimidating behavior as a kind of hazing);
8. judicial derelicts (may take place when an individual perceives their self to be bullied by a system, be it bureaucrats and their decisions or the legal system itself); and
9. retaliatory acts after whistleblowing (sometimes whistleblowing leads to a victimization process where the organization or its members “shoot the messenger,” that is retaliate against the person that exposed the wrongdoing) (p.213-216).

There are essentially aspects that workplace bullying shares with general bullying, such as power, aggression, and repeated acts. Power addresses hierarchy positions in the work setting such as tenured professor/tenure-track professor relationships and social work intern/client relationships. Aggression refers to displays of relational, verbal, and/or physical behaviors against a target (and then these acts are repeated). A person’s position in the workplace can dictate the type of bullying he or she may experience. There can be upward, horizontal, and downward bullying in the workplace; upward bullying is a subordinate bullying a person in a managerial position, horizontal

bullying is worker bullying their co-worker, and downward bullying is perpetrated by managers against subordinates (Branch, Ramsay, & Barker, 2012; Getz, 2013). Downward bullying may be found in social work academia, for although tenure-track faculty and tenured faculty are colleagues, the relationship is inherently hierarchical because the senior faculty member votes on the tenure-track faculty's tenure.

Another term associated with workplace bullying is mobbing, which refers to the non-sexual harassment of a coworker by a group of other members of the organization for the purpose of removing the targeted individual(s) from the department or organization (Sperry, 2009). Mobbing, like workplace bullying, is carried out by several employees. Relational aggression, a bullying subtype in which harm is caused through damage, or threat of damage, to an individual's relationships or reputation, can also be added to workplace bullying nomenclature. Relationally aggressive behaviors entail spreading rumors, negative comments shared with others when the victim is not present, sarcasm, and public embarrassment (Horton, 2014). Fogg (2008) found that these very behaviors also define academic bullies. The major difference between relational aggression and workplace bullying is the setting; relational aggression is prominent in children and adolescents in school settings, whereas workplace bullying is prominent in adults within the workplace.

Bullying behaviors in academia are effective, albeit subtle. These behaviors may include the bully's interrupting the victim while speaking at a committee meeting, spreading rumors to undermine a victim's credibility and collegiality, and ignoring the victim or shutting him or her out from social gatherings or conversations (Fogg, 2008). Furthermore, in workplace bullying, the victim typically perceives the bullying to be intentional, and intimidation is a strategy often used.

Unraveling the reasons for the various bullying behaviors listed can be difficult, but fortunately the use of the cognitive behavioral theory enhances our understanding of the reasons for workplace bullying within social work academia.

Cognitive behavioral theory (CBT) emphasizes that a person's thinking is the primary determinant of both emotional and behavioral actions and reactions to life events (Gonzalez-Prendes & Brisebois, 2012). According to CBT, an individual who displays workplace bullying behaviors has created a way of thinking that influences his or her own emotions and behaviors, more specifically bullying behaviors. Perpetrators of workplace bullying may have cognitive distortions or errors in thinking that allow them to believe that their bullying behaviors are self-preserving and beneficial.

At-Risk Status

Exposure to bullying at work may result in increased negative views of self, others, and the world (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002). Research has found that those most likely to be bullied in university settings are new hires and untenured workers (McKay, Huberman-Arnold, Fratzl, & Thomas, 2008). Individuals with poor social competencies or problematic profiles (i.e. neurotic, introvert, oversensitive, and suspicious) and depression with a tendency to convert psychological distress into psychosomatic symptoms are at higher risk of workplace bullying (Girardi, Monaco, Prestigiacomo, Talamo, Ruberto, & Tatarelli, 2007). Additional risk factors for workplace bullying include leadership practices and power hierarchies, role conflicts, organizational cultures and climates, and working conditions (Einarsen, Aasland, & Skogstad, 2007; Hague, Einarsen, Knardahl, Notealaers, & Skogstad, 2011). All of these risk factors correlate with various mental health problems.

Effects of Workplace Bullying

In a setting where workplace bullying is present, physical and psychosomatic symptoms may gradually emerge in the victims (Hallberg & Strandmark, 2006). Workplace bullying may result in the following individual outcomes: depression and anxiety, lowered self-esteem, difficulty making decisions, change-related anguish, psychological strain, passive aggressive traits, somatic symptoms, stress symptoms, problems with general health, the need for attention and affection, chronic

fatigue, and troubles with sleeping (Girardi et al., 2007; Lind, Glaso, Pallesen, & Einarsen, 2009; Nielson & Einarsen, 2012; Tuckey & Neall, 2014). Additional outcomes of workplace bullying include noncompliance, expulsion from the organization/leaving the organization, problems with concentration, increased absenteeism, reduced organizational commitment and job satisfaction, reduced productivity, an altered view of the work environment, worker's compensation claims, and costs regarding interventions by third parties (Nielson & Einarsen, 2012; Gamian-Wilk, 2013). Moreover, empirical studies suggest that victims of workplace bullying may suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder and that this trauma can be just as harmful as a physical assault on the job (Bond, Tuckey, & Dollard., 2010; Rodriguez-Munoz, Moreno-Jimenez, Sanz Vergel, & Garrosa Hernandez, 2010; Mayhew, McCarthy, Chaoell, Quinlan, Barker, & Sheehan, 2004).

Student, Faculty, and Programmatic Effects

Social workers and social workers in training are tasked with the duties of “[enhancing] human well-being and [helping] meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty” (“National Association of Social”, 2015, para. 1). In the social work academy, those tasked with upholding the NASW-COE are typically social work faculty and social work students. Of these individuals, social work students and tenure-track faculty are most at risk for workplace bullying due to their limited power in the political hierarchies of the academy.

Students may experience workplace bullying in their social work internship, in their social work classes, and when viewing workplace bullying amongst faculty. Ferris and Kline (2009) found that merely witnessing negative interpersonal interactions (i.e. gossip, put-downs, irritability, and negative attitudes) was particularly bothersome to some helping profession students in education,

medicine, nursing, and social work. This research concluded that students learn better when they relate to faculty members who are able to manage their own stress reactions. Social work faculty who experience workplace bullying as either victim or perpetrator may find it indirectly affects their teaching as well as their students' ability to learn. Another research study conducted with helping profession students found that medical students developed a lack of sensitivity after experiencing workplace bullying in their internship (Rosenberg & Silver as cited in Ferris & Kline, 2009). A similar lack of sensitivity in social work would affect client care and does not adhere to the NASW-COE values of dignity and worth of the person and importance of human relationships. Furthermore, any programmatic effects that develop as a result of workplace bullying would be problematic to the competence and integrity of the social work program. For example, faculty turnover due to workplace bullying may lead to adjunct professors and teaching assistants covering classes instead of more qualified tenure-track faculty.

Exploitative Mentoring

Mentoring is the collaboration between mentee and mentor, founded on openness, vulnerability, and the capacity for both parties to take risks with each other; however, power and control of knowledge can remain barriers to open communication and collaboration (Darwin, 2000). Mentorship in the field of social work is inherent in NASW-COE values (Service, Social Justice, Dignity and Worth of the Person, Importance of Human Relations, Integrity, and Competence), and our work is guided by these same principles.

Mentorship from tenured faculty is not only valuable but also indispensable in social work, especially for tenure-track professors. With the “publish or perish” statement ever present in tenure-track professors' minds, good leadership and guidance are necessities. Mentoring also has noticeable rewards for the mentor, mentee, and the university; and a correlation exists between a mentor's support and a new faculty member's feeling

connected to the organization (Schrodt, Cawyer, & Sanders, 2003). Phillips-Jones (1982) believes that mentors benefit from developing dependable, important subordinates and that the reward for the organization is that the mentor has spotted and developed new talent (as cited in Jacobi, 1991, p. 512). Still, within mentorship relationships, destructive and toxic behaviors can take place. These behaviors can undermine the mentee and lessen the mentee's trust in the university, as the behaviors' repeated existence suggests the mentor's behaviors are acceptable. This acceptance, whether passive or obvious, shows the lack of regard for the mentee's career and how this experience will influence his or her mental health. Also, dealing with certain mentor characteristics (such as inflated ego, misogynistic behavior, and micromanaging on collaborative projects/grants) can affect the tenure-track faculty in many ways.

Research has found weak connections and correlations between exploitative mentorship and workplace bullying (Darwin, 2000; Warren, 2005). Chung and Kowalski (2006) found that a lack of mentorship or poor mentorship is associated with faculty isolation, stress, burnout, and turnover. Tenure-track professors in the social work field may assume that mentorship is based on the NASW-COE and that any mentored experience will be an ethical interaction and transaction of ideas and work. However, tenured professors and mentors frequently overload newly hired tenure-track professors with work (for example, asking them to serve on committees). Work overload is common among tenure-track faculty, and it makes them vulnerable to a lack of the scholarly productivity that is needed for tenure.

The extension of the NASW-COE to include vulnerable populations, such as tenure-track social work professors, is apparent. Inherent in the NASW-COE is the resolution that those new to the field will be socialized on social work's mission, values, ethical principles, and ethical standards ("National Association of Social", 2015, para. 5). This socialization is present in the social work academy through both the mentorship relationship

and the faculty/student relationship, where power is obviously unbalanced and ethical concerns may arise when this power is abused (McDonald & Hite, 2005).

Tenure-track professors in the field of social work are expected to uphold the NASW-COE and to teach social work students the mission of the profession, which includes enhancing the well-being of all people, especially the vulnerable and oppressed. An ethical dilemma in the social work academy is the acknowledgement that there are vulnerable populations that exist within social work academia, and particular attention should be paid to their empowerment. Women faculty, faculty of color, and tenure-track faculty are all vulnerable populations; and the academy has long been known for inequality and inequity when it comes to gender and ethnicity. Compared with their female European American counterparts, female faculty of color typically teach more, advise greater numbers of students, engage in more committee work, and tend not to be included in as much collaborative research with their peers, contributing to tenure and promotion problems and flight from the academy (Mkandawire-Valhmu, Kakpo, & Stevens, 2010). Burk and Eby (2010) found that when a tenure-track professor is experiencing high levels of manipulation, the fear of retaliation may cause the tenure-track professor to remain in the relationship out of belief that a manipulative mentor might try to sabotage his or her career.

Discussion

In the social work academy, ethical concerns may exist within administrator/professor, professor/student, intern supervisor/student, and student/student relationships. The mere thought of social workers taking part in exploitative mentorship or workplace bullying should be implausible since this behavior is contrary to the NASW-COE, which was "...designed to help social workers identify relevant considerations when professional obligations conflict or ethical uncertainties arise" ("National Association of Social", 2015, para. 5). When ethical uncertainties arise and give way to

workplace bullying interactions, social workers should consult the NASW-COE to discover the best course of action. Social work practice and research are guided by our values and ethics. Therefore, social work academia has a duty to develop an understanding of workplace bullying and make sure the social work academy is one that displays integrity and respect for all individuals. Mentoring has a negative effect when it reinforces unquestioning acceptance of the existing culture (McDonald & Hite, 2005), and workplace bullying occurs because of the organizational culture (Kircher, Stilwell, Talboot, & Chesborough, 2011). The organizational culture of schools of social work should utilize the NASW-COE in their pursuit to educate professional social workers, and this education can also extend to tenure-track professors.

Conclusion

In order to raise consciousness about issues related to workplace bullying in the social work academy, we need to evaluate our methods of training social work students and how we incorporate the NASW-COE in teaching, learning, and practice. A few recommendations for successful implementation of these NASW-COE training methods are as follows:

1. Train social work field placement students before and during placements to address issues of workplace bullying problems that the student might encounter (Maidment, 2003);
2. Build an awareness, through mandatory training for social work faculty and social work intern supervisors, of potential and sometimes inevitable ethical concerns (McDonald & Hite, 2005).

Power hierarchies and poor mentorship are precursors to workplace bullying, and this can ruin the true mission of social work academia. In the social work field we deal with human behavior and with environmental influences that are unique

to each individual. The social work academy is a unique workforce that should incorporate the NASW-COE within all aspects of social work, including teaching and peer guidance.

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