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## **DISPOSITIONAL, SOCIAL AND WORK-RELATED DETERMINANTS OF WORKPLACE BULLYING**

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### **Abstract**

Workplace bullying is a well-known and emerging concept in the field of research and academics. It is a negative phenomenon that has been reported to have high prevalence rates in different countries. The present study aims to find out the different determinants of workplace bullying among Pakistani employees. These determinants comprised of dispositional (personality traits and affectivity), social (group compliance) and work-related (work environment) factors. The sample of the study was comprised of 621 employees belonging to four different occupational sectors including (bank, telecommunication, health and education). Negative acts Questionnaire, Neo-Five Factor Inventory, Positive Affectivity and Negative Affectivity Schedule, Group Compliance Scale, and Work Environment scale were used to measure the workplace bullying and its determinants. The minimum job experience of 1 year and 16 years of education have been used as an inclusion criterion. Findings of the study depicted the high correlations between the study variables and results further revealed that from dispositional factors, neuroticism and negative affectivity positively predicted the workplace bullying whereas agreeableness, consciousness, positive affectivity, group compliance and work environment

negatively predicted the workplace bullying. The study revealed that the determinants from each category are very crucial and play an important role in the experience of workplace bullying.

**Keywords:** affectivity, group compliance, personality traits, work environment, workplace bullying

**Keypoints:**

Previously a lot of researches have been conducted to determine the prevalence and consequences of workplace bullying. In Pakistan, most of the researches focus to explore its prevalence and outcomes among different professions. The present study is an attempt to measure the impact of different determinants on workplace bullying as no published research in Pakistan has attempted to explore the dispositional, social and work-related determinants of workplace bullying.

### **Introduction**

In the last few decades, workplace bullying has gained much attention from the researchers in the field of organizational psychology. The researchers reported that almost 95% of the employees experienced some kind of bullying at their workplace during 5 years and they further emphasized that no matter the prevalence rate is as low as 10 % still workplace bullying needs consideration (Einarsen, et al., 2011; Fox & Stallworth, 2005; Pei, et al., 2020). Furthermore, workplace bullying has negative but crucial impacts on different levels; individual, group and organizational (Cortina, 2008; Raknes, et al., 2016). The literature regarding workplace bullying has been matured over the previous period of 30 years since the publication of the first study (Leymann, 1990) explicitly exploring workplace bullying.

The present study investigated the level-based antecedents of workplace bullying comprising the individual, group, and organizational levels. The primary focus is on the antecedents of bullying at these levels as according to Tepper and Henle (2011) workplace bullying is believed to be significantly distinctive from other constructs which are based on targeting the employees. The definition of workplace bullying emphasizes that negative

acts should be persistent and frequent. Fox and Stallworth (2010) suggest that these definitional necessities advocate that bullying is a steady and continuing occurrence which has psychological consequences as compared to the single act of aggression/violence. Though workplace bullying varies from indirect to direct acts, yet the indirect acts of bullying are more frequent (Arthur, 2011; Sansone & Sansone, 2015). That is why there is an agreement with current contention which explains that workplace bullying is amply discrete and significant that it should be treated separately (Escartin, 2016; Tepper & Henle, 2011).

Bullying can be inspected through diverse perspectives like personal, group or organizational. Bullying can be a product of environmental facets of the workplace, like a deprived psychosocial work environment, including a lack of communication and teamwork and the personal factors of the targets. Similarly, Zapf (1999) and Zhou, et al. (2015) also supported this view as bullying is supplementary with a deleterious work environment.

A comprehensive perspective of organizational psychology described that bullying is a complex collaborating and rising process in which the role of the work situation and organizational climate, the characteristics of the target, the communication between the members of the workplace is very important (Einarsen, 2000; Hoel, et al., 1999; Nielsen et al., 2012). After understanding workplace bullying as a fundamental and complex issue in the workplace, it seems suitable to review its essential antecedents.

Researches focusing on the investigation of target antecedents reported mixed findings. Personality is the main construct that got conflicting results regarding workplace bullying as according to Persson et al. (2009) victims reported to have higher levels of neuroticism and extraversion. Similarly, another study reported that targets scored high on neuroticism (Rai & Agarwal, 2019) but contrary to the previous study they score low on extraversion, along with agreeableness, and conscientiousness (Glaso, et al., 2007). These findings got support from theoretical perspectives as according to Rai and Agarwal (2019) employees who are introvert are more vulnerable to

be victimized by the perpetrator as being passive they are unlikely to strike back to workplace bullying. On the other hand, those employees who score low on agreeableness may be targeted due to the lack of agreement with others. Lastly, workers scoring low on conscientiousness are supposed to be ignored the subtle forms of bullying that is why employees scoring low on conscientiousness are more exposed to workplace bullying. Based on these the first hypothesis was formulated stating that personality traits will significantly predict workplace bullying (hypothesis 1)

Researches also reported that like neuroticism, victims score high on negative affect (Coyne, et al., 2003; Glaso et al., 2007; Vartia, 1996). According to Watson and Clark (1984), negative affect is a tendency to practice negative emotions including sadness, anxiety, anger, and fear. These findings are also consistent with another research which described that the more an employee is fearful, anxious and gloomy more he is vulnerable for being victimized by the perpetrator (Aquino & Lamertz, 2004). Likewise, self-esteem also appeared to be negatively related with the workplace bullying and making the employees more vulnerable to be the target of workplace bullying because they lack confidence due to which they feel reluctant to retaliate (Einarsen, et al., 1994; Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2001; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002). In light of these researches, the study makes a hypothesis that negative affectivity will positively lead to workplace bullying (Hypothesis 2).

Researches regarding the demographics demonstrated mixed findings as few researches reported that women are more vulnerable to be victimized as compared to men (Lewis & Gunn, 2007; Salin, 2003), while few researches found no significant gender differences (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996; Leymann, 1996). Furthermore, Hoel et al. (1999) also revealed that women are bullied by both men and women whereas men are only bullied by men. Studies regarding the age also reported mixed findings as Einarsen and Skogstad (1996) reported that as compared to younger ones older employees have a higher likelihood of being bullied while other studies reported contradicting results (Vartia, 1996).

Though researchers have given very little attention to the group-level antecedents of workplace bullying (Attell, et al., 2017; Heames & Harvey, 2006; Ramsay, et al., 2010; Salmivalli, 2010) yet it is believed that certain group-level factors may have a significant impact in the perception of workplace bullying experience. Based on empirical literature regarding group-level antecedents of workplace bullying, Vartia (1996) reported that 20% of victims perceived that they were victimized as they are different from others. In line of these findings the present study hypothesized that group compliance will negatively lead to workplace bullying (Hypothesis 3).

Several organizational factors have been empirically reported as the leading factors of workplace bullying like organizational culture and work environment. According to different researches workplace bullying may be triggered by workgroups or organizations that regularize offensive and competitive behaviour (Coyne et al., 2003; Lutgen-Sandvik, et al., 2007; Salin, 2003; Van den Brande, et al., 2016). There is a need to recognize the importance of organizational culture along with its probable impact in initiating workplace bullying. The empirical researches also mentioned that certain organizational cultures like health have a high prevalence of workplace bullying (Einarsen et al., 1994; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2001). According to Salin (2003), such workplaces which have strong power imbalances may lead to such situations that can stimulate the workplace bullying and as a result, such negative behaviours can be institutionalized. So it can be said that certain organizations use workplace bullying as a technique to get things done (Salin, 2003). Bulutlar and Unler Oz (2009) investigating the role of ethical environment in stimulating workplace bullying found that those organizations which have influential ethical climates and force workers to work inconsiderately and for their self-interests, are reported to have a high prevalence of workplace bullying. Whereas considerate and rules following an ethical environment anticipated decrease in workplace bullying (Bulutlar & Unler Oz, 2009).

According to Salin (2003) a very attention-grabbing yet terrifying angle of workplace bullying is that in certain organizations it is believed to be an effective approach to enhance employees' performance. It can be illustrated as struggling for distinction without considering the costs, may support workplace bullying being accepted in the workplace. According to previous researches, those work environments which encourage roughness from its employees as a way of completing the task can stimulate workplace bullying among employees (Neuman & Baron, 1998; Salin, 2003).

As mentioned above, the work environment based on certain rules and policies had lower levels of workplace bullying (Bulutlar & Unler Oz, 2009). Wimbush, et al. (1997) also reported that the work environment had a significant relationship with employees' behaviour. Hence, the establishment of clear policies prevent bullying behaviours and the likelihood of workplace bullying significantly decreases when these rules are implanted within the work environment of the organization. Furthermore, researchers have empirically established that reward structures, work organization, and organizational change/restructuring can predict workplace bullying (De Cuyper, et al., 2009; Hoel & Salin, 2003; Salin, 2003; Skogstad, et al., 2007). Certain forms of work like small but repetitive chores can generate feelings of frustration that are further associated with workplace bullying (Einarsen et al., 2003; Hoel & Salin, 2003). Our hypothesis 4 (Work Environment will have a significant impact on workplace bullying and its types (Work-related and Person-related) is based on this discussion.

Although workplace bullying is an essential concept that is why the existing literature is not so sufficient yet it validated each selected construct under bullying. So the study aims to address this gap in the literature by exploring the crucial factors (dispositional, social and work-related) in the onset of bullying at work. In place of the aforementioned picture, the present study tries to incorporate the important features emerging as the determinants of workplace bullying.

## **Method**

**Sample.** Between 2015 and 2016, 621 questionnaires were collected from different organizations in Pakistan. The study explored the antecedents of workplace bullying by using a self-administered questionnaire. The inclusion criterion was having a minimum job experience of 1 year ( $M = 30.34$ ,  $SD = 5.46$ ), an age range of 22 to 60 ( $M = 30.34$ ,  $SD = 5.46$ ) years and an educational baseline of masters (16 years of formal education). 42% of the respondents were bank employees, 24% of the respondents were university teachers, 17% of the respondents were doctors and 17% of the respondents were telecommunication employees.

### Measures

*Negative Acts Questionnaire* was used to measure workplace bullying as it is the most frequently and widely used instrument to measure the bullying at the workplace (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2001; Salin, 2001). It consists of 5-point response format ranging from 1 = never to 5 = about daily. The reported alpha reliability was .93.

*NEO-FFI (McCrae & Costa, 2004)* having 60 items was used to measure the personality traits. The inventory has 5-point response format ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The reliability of the original scale was ranging from .79 to .83.

*Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) (Watson, et al., 1988)* with 20 items was used to measure the affectivity. There are two subscales, positive affect and negative affect with a response format of 5-point (1 = very slightly and 5 = extremely). The alpha coefficients for both subscales ranged from .86 to .90 and .84 - .87 respectively.

*15 items Compliance scale (Gamian-Wilk, 2013)* was used to measure group compliance. The 5-point response format ranging from 1 = “does not describe me, to 5 = “describes me well”. The alpha coefficient was .90.

*The 66 items Work Environment Scale (Moos, 1994, adopted by Maqsood, 2012)* was used to measure the perception of the current work environment of employees. The WES measures three different dimensions of work setting: Relationship, Personal Growth and System Maintenance &

Change. The WES has four-point response format and alpha coefficient ranged from .69 to .86.

### Results

Hierarchical regression analysis is used to test the proposed hypotheses of the study.

**Table 1**

*Correlations, Mean Standard Deviations and Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients of Scales (N = 621)*

| Variables | 1      | 2     | 3     | 4     | 5     | 6    | 7    | 8    | 9    | 10   |
|-----------|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|------|------|------|------|
| 1. WB     | (.94)  |       |       |       |       |      |      |      |      |      |
| 2. NET    | .09*   | .52   |       |       |       |      |      |      |      |      |
| 3. EXT    | -      | .48   | .62   |       |       |      |      |      |      |      |
|           | .12*   |       |       |       |       |      |      |      |      |      |
|           | *      |       |       |       |       |      |      |      |      |      |
| 4. OTE    | -.06   | .45*  | .69*  | .50   |       |      |      |      |      |      |
|           |        | *     | *     |       |       |      |      |      |      |      |
| 5. AGR    | -      | .54*  | .68*  | .68*  | .60   |      |      |      |      |      |
|           | .14*   | *     | *     | *     |       |      |      |      |      |      |
|           | *      |       |       |       |       |      |      |      |      |      |
| 6. COS    | -      | .39*  | .73*  | .71*  | .72*  | .68  |      |      |      |      |
|           | .24*   | *     | *     | *     | *     |      |      |      |      |      |
|           | *      |       |       |       |       |      |      |      |      |      |
| 7. PA     | -.20** | .11*  | .36** | .39** | .34** | .43* | .85  |      |      |      |
|           |        |       |       |       |       | *    |      |      |      |      |
| 8. NA     | .31**  | .18** | -.08  | -.05  | -.07  | -    | -    | .88  |      |      |
|           |        |       |       |       |       | .12* | .28* |      |      |      |
|           |        |       |       |       |       | *    | *    |      |      |      |
| 9. COM    | -.17** | .13** | .27** | .28** | .22** | .36* | .36* | -.06 | .86  |      |
|           |        |       |       |       |       | *    | *    |      |      |      |
| 10. WES   | -.12** | .29** | .36** | .43** | .41** | .43* | .42* | -.03 | .42* | .89  |
|           |        |       |       |       |       | *    | *    |      | *    |      |
| Mean      | 45.61  | 37.54 | 38.39 | 37.37 | 38.82 | 41.9 | 34.1 | 20.9 | 53.4 | 97.1 |

|     |       |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
|-----|-------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
|     |       |      |      |      |      | 6    | 9    | 8    | 7    | 1    |
| S.D | 16.82 | 4.33 | 4.84 | 3.74 | 4.42 | 5.07 | 7.19 | 7.95 | 11.8 | 16.7 |
|     |       |      |      |      |      |      |      |      | 4    | 7    |

*Note.*WB = workplace bullying, NET = neuroticism, EXT = extraversion, OTE = openness to experience, AGR = agreeableness, COS = conscientiousness, PA = positive affect, NA = negative affect, COM = compliance, WES = work environment.

Table no 1 shows the correlation of workplace bullying with its antecedents. The table depicts that workplace bullying is significantly positively correlated with the neuroticism while negatively correlated with extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. The table also shows that positive affect, compliance, work environment, relationship dimension, and personal growth dimension, had a significant negative correlation with workplace bullying. Negative affect had a significant positive relationship with workplace bullying.

**Table 2**

*Multiple Regression Analysis on scores of Workplace Bullying by Personality Traits, Affectivity, Compliance, and Work Environment (N = 621)*

| Personality traits   | Workplace Bullying |             |         |        |       |
|--|--------------------|-------------|---------|--------|-------|
|  | <i>B</i>           | <i>SE B</i> | $\beta$ | 95% CI |       |
|  |                    |             |         | LL     | UL    |
| Neuroticism  | .695               | .162        | .178*** | .377   | 1.01  |
| Extraversion   | .056               | .192        | .015    | -.321  | .432  |
| Openness to experience   | .101               | .194        | .025    | -.280  | .483  |
| Agreeableness  | -.336              | .199        | -.082*  | -.726  | .054  |
| Conscientiousness  | -.921              | .170        | -.272** | -1.254 | -.587 |
| R = .303, R <sup>2</sup> = .092, $\Delta R^2 = .085$ (F = 12.83**) |                    |             |         |        |       |
| Positive Affect  | -.283              | .109        | -.103** | -.497  | -.068 |
| Negative Affect  | .694               | .100        | .277**  | .497   | .890  |
| R = .328, R <sup>2</sup> = .107, $\Delta R^2 = .105$ (F = 38.25**) |                    |             |         |        |       |
| Compliance   | -.366              | .081        | -.177** | -.525  | -.208 |

$$R = .177, R^2 = .031, \Delta R^2 = .030 (F = 20.53^{**})$$

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|                  |        |      |          |       |       |
|------------------|--------|------|----------|-------|-------|
| Work Environment | -0.171 | .053 | -0.127** | -.274 | -.064 |
|------------------|--------|------|----------|-------|-------|

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$$R = .127, R^2 = .016, \Delta R^2 = .015 (F = 10.41^{**})$$


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\*\* $p \leq .00$

Table 2 presents the significant antecedents of workplace bullying and results revealed that neuroticism, and negative affectivity, which are the individual-level antecedents, positively lead to the workplace bullying while agreeableness, conscientiousness, positive affectivity, and group compliance are significant negative predictors of workplace bullying. The table further revealed that the work environment is also a significant negative predictor of workplace bullying. Our hypothesis 1 was partially supported while hypotheses 2, 3, and 4 are fully supported.

### Discussion

The internal consistency of all the measures was estimated by Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Findings depicted that most of the scales and their subscales have good alpha coefficients of .70 to .90s (see Table 1). The alpha reliability coefficients of all scales and respective subscales appeared to be above the threshold of .60 except Neuroticism and Openness to Experience Subscale of NEO-FFI. The further scrutiny of data revealed that the above-mentioned subscales have some reverse-scored items in scales, which involve principally positive items. The reverse or negative items involved in these scales are the major factors for low reliability. These scales had been reported to have low reliabilities in previous empirical studies conducted in Pakistan (Fayyaz, 2008). The reliability estimates of affectivity, compliance, and work environment scale (.85, .88, .86, & .89) are quite high.

Majority of the findings of the correlation matrix highlighted the crucial relationships between workplace bullying and its antecedents in the line of direction of previous existing literature. The major theoretical assumption emphasizing the importance of personality traits was supported as neuroticism and negative affectivity were significantly positively related with the workplace bullying, but on the other hand extraversion, agreeableness,

conscientiousness and positive affectivity are negatively related with the workplace bullying. These findings got support from the empirical researches reporting that victims of workplace bullying score low on extraversion, agreeableness and conscientiousness (Brodsky 1976; Coyne, et al., 2000; Einarsen et al., 1994; Mikkelsen & Einarsen 2002; Niedle, 1995; Olweus, 2003; Thylefor, 1987; Vartia, 1996). Results also depicted that group compliance and work environment were significantly negatively related to workplace bullying.

In the current study, results have supported our hypothesis 1 regarding neuroticism, agreeableness and conscientiousness as neuroticism turned out to be a significant positive predictor of workplace bullying and both of its forms i.e., person-related and work-related. Employees having a high score on neuroticism tend to experience more bullying as compared to the persons scoring low on neuroticism. Results also confirmed our hypotheses as it revealed that agreeableness and conscientiousness also significantly negatively predicted the workplace bullying and work-related form but the person related form of bullying was significantly predicted by only conscientiousness. It means that person who is more agreeable and conscientious will experience less bullying. But results revealed that extraversion and openness to experience had a non-significant prediction of workplace bullying. These findings are supported by existing research results (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2013; Nielsen & Knardahl, 2015).

Similarly, hypotheses 2 is accepted as results revealed that positive affect had a significant negative relationship with workplace bullying and person-related form. It means that positive affectivity will lead to less exposure to workplace bullying. Negative affect positively predicted workplace bullying and both of its forms i.e., person-related and work-related. Coyne et al. (2000) supported these results by suggesting that personal factors can be an important predictor of workplace bullying. Furthermore, Einarsen (2000) reported that the target's personality is an important factor in dealing with exposure to workplace bullying.

Results also revealed that workplace bullying is significantly negatively predicted by group compliance and hypothesis 3 is fully supported by these findings as to compliance not only predicted bullying but it also significantly predicted both forms of bullying i.e., person-related and work-related. These findings are supported by the previous research of Gamian-Wilk (2013) on the significant relationship between compliance and bullying.

Hypothesis number 4 is partially supported as results revealed that the work environment is significantly negatively predicted workplace bullying. The results depicted that the relationship dimension has a significant prediction of workplace bullying but the remaining two dimensions (personal growth & system maintenance) had a non-significant prediction for workplace bullying and person-related form of bullying but the work-related form of bullying had been significantly predicted by personal growth and system maintenance. All these findings are supported by previous literature which suggested that the work environment is very crucial regarding the perception of workplace bullying (Tambur & Vadi, 2012).

### **Conclusion**

The present study determines the predicting factors of workplace bullying and found out that certain personality traits, affectivity, group compliance and work environment are the significant predictors of workplace bullying and to minimize the workplace bullying one should target these factors. The present study has some limitations like it is based on the self-report and cross-sectional design which can be a problem in getting true responses. The use of cross-sectional design limits us as the effects of these factors cannot be explored in the longer run. The sample is not representative of the whole employees' population. In the nutshell, the present study aims to determine the predicting factors of workplace bullying and the findings can help the HR managers to be cautious about these factors to maximize the employee as well as organization's performance.

### **Limitations and Future Research Directions**

The study has certain limitations as the use of self-report measures for data collection increases the risk of common method variance that can exaggerate the association between numerous variables. The use of self-report measures also leads to the social desirability effect in which participants may try to respond in a socially desirable way for managing their acceptable impression. The cross-sectional research design was used to conduct the current study but it interferes in making the causal inferences about the existing associations and it is also very difficult to control the effects of any confounding and extraneous variable, and it appears to be another limitation of the current study.

The present study has explored the personality traits of victims of bullying. Future research should include perpetrators/bullies in the research to have a complete picture of bullying by adding the important work-related constructs. To establish the causal inferences about the association of variables, the longitudinal research design should be used.

### **Implications**

This study has some very insightful implications as it elaborated the pragmatic approach of different levels of antecedents leading to bullying. The findings suggested that not only personality traits (neuroticism and negative affectivity), initiate bullying process but the other factors (group compliance and work environment) also significantly curtail the likelihood of employees to be a victim of bullying. Results also suggested that employees scoring high on neuroticism and negative affect are more likely to be a victim of bullying at workplace whereas employees scoring high on extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and positive affect decrease the risk of being a victim of bullying. Therefore, these positive personality characteristics must be checked and given importance in the process of selection and recruitment. Given the findings of the present study, which demonstrated group compliance and work environment as a significant predictor of workplace bullying, organizations must evolve such environment that will be healthy and nurturing for

employees and give them a platform to establish good relations and compliance with each other.

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