

Take the Bull by the Horns: Structural approach to minimize workplace bullying
for women in American higher education

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Abstract

Few studies have examined the extent of workplace bullying in American higher education; however, a 2015 study confirmed that 62% of respondents (n=401) were affected by workplace bullying 18 months prior to the study (Hollis 2015). A closer examination of the women respondents (n=281) revealed that 71% of the women in this subset faced workplace bullying. Women respondents were also more likely to seek structural solutions, such as reporting bullying to their immediate supervisors or human resources staff.

Workplace bullying is couched in power. Those with power control tenure and promotion as well as resources; they can also hinder women from obtaining leadership positions. However, without policy or legislation, incivility is governed by the personal discretion of workplace leaders. As workplace bullying typically emerges from a power differential, Bolman and Deal's (2013) theories regarding organizational structure and politics serve as the theoretical lens for this study.

This study is based on data collected from 175 colleges and universities in which participants, consisting of women from faculty and administrative positions, were asked to

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reflect on the extent of workplace bullying in American higher education. Women's responses are considered through descriptive statistics. Further, Chi Square examination shows women rely more on official reporting strategies than male counterparts. Therefore, the findings of this study will be valuable for women and/or leaders and supervisors in higher education.

A variety of researchers (Björkqvist et al. 2006; Branch et al. 2013; Cowan 2012; Duffy and Sperry 2007; Fritz 2014; Harvey et al. 2006; Liefoghe and Davie 2010; Matthiesen and Einarsen 2007; Yamada 2000; Zabrodka and Kveton 2013) have considered the extent of workplace bullying in the general population. However, the existing literature has not examined workplace bullying in American higher education administration. Consequently, Hollis (2015) conducted an independent study, which confirmed that 62% of respondents (n=401) were affected by workplace bullying 18 months prior to the study.

A secondary examination of the existing Hollis data set shows that workplace targets have a multitude of reactions to enduring abuse at work. Various studies (Dehue et al. 2012; Gholipour et al. 2011; Hollis and McCalla 2013; Lovell and Lee 2011; Namie and Namie 2009) have also reported on targets' reactions to workplace bullying. The results found that respondents isolate themselves (Lewis and Orford 2005) or engage in escapist behaviors or substances abuse. The secondary analysis of the data set aligns with previous studies, which document how workplace bullying can have an adverse effect on employees' welfare (Shematek 2012). Consistent with the Hollis' (2015) study, Shematek (2012) reported that targets of workplace bullying take more sick time, disengage from work, and isolate themselves from others, which leads to organizational productivity being compromised.

Further, in order to avoid workplace bullying, those being bullied request transfers to other departments, quit their jobs, or reject promotions to a better paying position.

Review of the Literature

Since the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, workers of protected classes can pursue federal protection from workplace harassment based on race, color, age, gender, religion, or country of origin. American employers with 15 or more employees who fail to create an equitable work environment for all staff can face legal action from the individual facing discrimination. The legal definition of American sexual harassment is:

It is unlawful to harass a person (an applicant or employee) because of that person's sex. Harassment can include "sexual harassment" or unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature. Harassment does not have to be of a sexual nature; however, it can include offensive remarks about a person's sex. For example, it is illegal to harass a woman by making offensive comments about women in general ("Sexual Harassment" 2015).

The last recorded date of monetary settlements in relation to sexual harassment cases was 2011; an annual total of \$52.3 million was awarded to complainants who sought financial damages for sexual discrimination. The 2011-year recorded the second highest annual total for settlements since 1997 ("Sexual Harassment Charges EEOC & FEPAs Combined: FY 1997 - FY 2011").

While this contemporary benchmark of damages points to the courts' application of the law since 1997, the court rulings in regard to sexual harassment and the protection of

women in the workplace under Title VII had a tenuous evolution. At its inception, language pertaining to sex discrimination was added to the civil rights legislation at the last minute as a determinant to the racial discrimination bill that was also being considered. Despite language about gender discrimination being added to the bill in an effort to jeopardize the racial prohibition in the same bill, the civil rights law was passed (Crawford 1994).

In the early 1970s, courts ruled that a supervisor's unwanted sexual advances were personal preferences and not part of the job; therefore, sexual harassment did not fall under prohibition as outlined by Title VII Civil Rights Act. In short, personal attraction and its corresponding behavior were interpreted outside the governance of workplace discrimination. Other cases, such as *Barnes v. Train* 1974² and *Tomkins v. PSE&G* 1977³ also separated supervisors' sexual advances from work policy, hence undercutting Title VII (Crawford 1994). Despite these legal setbacks, women continued to file sexual harassment cases, claiming that employers have a responsibility to curb unwanted sexual behavior in the workplace (Baker 2001, 408).

Despite the passage of the Civil Rights in 1964, federal courts did not rule on sexual harassment cases until the mid 1970s (Baker 2001). Six high profile cases, in which all the complainants lost their jobs, set the contemporary stage for equality through sexual

² *Barnes v. Train*, 13 Fair Empl. Prac. Cas. 123 (D.D.C 1974). The complainant's position was eliminated because she refused a sexual affair with her boss, not because she was facing gender discrimination in her work duties or on the job. This 1974 decision to deny complainant's claim was not published until 1977 when the Circuit Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia reversed the trial court's dismissal, establishing the first federal appellate court to issue a full written opinion ruling that sexual harassment violated Title VII.

³ *Tomkins v. Public Serv. Elec. & Gas Co.*, 568 F.2d 1044, 1045 (3rd Cir. 1977). Tomkins was fired in 1975 for refusing sexual advances from her supervisor in exchange for a favorable evaluation. Originally the complainant was denied because "gender lines might as easily be reversed or not crossed at all." The United States Court of Appeals, Third Circuit overturned the original decision on November 23, 1977.

discrimination legislation. Most significantly, *Williams v. Saxbe*, a 1976⁴ case that received national attention, confirmed that sexual harassment is a form of sexual discrimination and prohibited by Title VII legislation.

The majority of sexual discrimination cases in the 1970s were quid pro quo cases; this meant the employer sought an exchange of sexual favors for women's employment stability or status. However, the 1980 case of *Brown v. City of Guthrie*,⁵ involved a civilian police dispatcher complaining about unwanted sexual comments, advances, and gestures. When the complainant reported the conditions to the chief of police, he remarked that she was "over reacting." The court ruling, however, stated that "behavior that created an intimidating, hostile, and offensive working environment was an impermissible condition of employment" (Baker 2001, 411).

When the Supreme Court heard *Meritor Savings Bank v. Vinson* in 1986⁶, the salient language about a "hostile work environment" provided the necessary momentum to protect women from unwanted gender-based harassment on the job (Crawford 1994). With the advent of language pertaining to a "hostile work environment," women claimed that a productive work environment was eroded by employers' sexual harassment. These cases claimed that unwanted sexual advances compromised the emotional well being of staff, created anxiety, and debilitated psychology (Baker 2001, 409).

⁴*Williams v. Saxbe*, 413 F. Supp. 654 (D.D.C. 1976). U.S. District Court rules quid pro quo is form of sexual harassment.

⁵ *Brown v. City of Guthrie*, 1980 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 12163 (W.D. Ok. 1980). Legal precedent for "hostile work environment" is established.

⁶*Meritor Savings Bank v. Vinson*, 477 U.S. 57 (1986). Supreme Court rules sexual harassment is sexual discrimination and upholds the prior decision that a "hostile work environment" is actionable.

The history of harassment against women in the workplace shows an increasingly sophisticated harasser; quid pro quo cases transformed into arguments about sex and pornography being a natural part of life, and therefore not prohibited by Title VII. As the courts advanced the “hostile environment” language, harassers increasingly abandoned overt sexual approaches for more covert harassment.

To file a sexual discrimination lawsuit, a complainant must establish a prima face case that the discriminatory behavior is based on sex/gender. Sexual or gender-based remarks or gestures typically need to be present to clearly define that the harassment is gender driven. However, a harasser or bully can be motivated by discriminatory bias and be savvy enough not to invoke overtly sexist comments. Consequently, women who have such supervisors might find themselves facing incivility on the job, without the overt signifiers noting sexism. Hence, harassment that is sanitized of sexist animus can be recast as bullying. McDonald and Dear (2008) conducted a quantitative analysis of 9000 discrimination and harassment cases reported by women; the results found that women are at a disadvantage in the workplace and possess diminished power compared to men.

In short, harassment and bullying are synonymous. For the purpose of this study, bullying means:

...Harassing, offending, socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone’s work tasks. This behavior occurs repeatedly and regularly over a period of about six months. With the escalating process, the person confronted ends up in an inferior position and becomes the target of systematic negative social acts (Einarsen et al. 2011).

Namie (2009) and Hollis (2015) reported that women are the disproportionate targets of workplace bullying; this disproportionate occurrence of women being targets appears to be

a compelling factor, and potentially an extension of gender-based harassment. Workplace bullying distracts workers and destroys morale. Bullying, which does not specifically invoke sexist language, is what Yamada (2000) deems as status free harassment yet tends to affect women more than men.

With further consideration of women striving to gain executive and leadership positions, Kolman (2004, 153) posited that women "... in jobs not traditionally ascribed to their gender are perceived as threats in these occupations and are, therefore, specifically targeted for sexual harassment." As women leave entry-level, secretarial, and support roles for supervisory and executive career paths, they face increasing exposure to workplace bullying.

Theory Framework

Similar to studies on sexual harassment (Berdahl et al. 1996; Cleveland and Kerst 1993; O'Connell and Korabik 2000; Wilson and Thompson 2001), workplace bullying is couched in power. Bolman and Deal (2013) have suggested that this type of power varies and includes: position power, reward power, coercive power, expert power, reputation power, and personal power. Power, such as position or coercive power, can entail punitive elements. Workers often consider personal or reputation power as more collaborative forms of power. In either case, official or informal leadership uses power to propel an organization to achieve its goals and objectives. In instances when resources, such as time, money, or human capital are threatened, leaders may use more coercive forms of power to create urgency or demand productivity.

Power may be organizational, for example, the power a dean has over an assistant. Power may also align with expertise, and therefore with a faculty member who is highly

touted and/or secures grants. The person in power has access and influence (Goldblatt 2007; Hauge et al. 2009; Hutchinson et al. 2010). However, when colleagues abuse power, staff with less power can face humiliation and manipulation. In higher education, power resides in tenure, the ability to create revenue streams, and the ability to bring positive notoriety to an institution. This also means that faculty with less status or contingent status may be more susceptible to abuse or coercion (Hollis 2015a).

In the face of official power, polices presume to set objective benchmarks for behavior that should govern the actions of staff. For example, such policy structures can prohibit nepotism, fraternization, or conflicts of interest. Federal and state laws do not typically forbid these behaviors, yet organizations develop such policy structures and govern everyone in the organization by these standards. As federal or state policy does not prohibit workplace bullying, organizations can craft such policies to protect and govern staff regardless of their job function.

Employees with any type of power within the workplace possess the ability to exert his or her will on a subordinate figure. Those in a position of power in higher education have the ability to control tenure and promotion and limit support for women seeking leadership positions. As women hold a minority of such executive positions in higher education, they are less likely to possess the power required to award or deny tenure; consequently, they are less likely to control the gateway to executive leadership.

Das (2009) has posited that those employees with less power are more likely to report having been bullied in the workplace. As women continue to occupy less powerful positions in higher education, they are more likely to seek formal reporting structures to alleviate inequities on the job. However, without formal policy or legislation, bullying and incivility

are governed by the personal discretion of leaders in the workplace. Women typically do not have the power or influence to govern workplace culture.

Problem Statement

Harassment and bullying are synonymous behaviors that erode workplace morale and productivity. Statics show that 71% of women face and 50% of men confront workplace bullying (Hollis 2015). As workplace bullying can motivate the target to interrupt his or her career trajectory, this abusive behavior compromises any target's progression to leadership and executive positions. Targets of workplace bullying adopt various strategies to seek relief from harassment; gender may be a compelling factor with regards to how targets chose to respond. Analyzing this issue from the perspective of gender can help those in leadership positions to craft strategies to better support women who are dealing with bullying in higher education.

Purpose

Workplace bullying has been previously confirmed as occurring at higher rates in American higher education than in the general population. A study conducted by Hollis (2015) found that 62% of respondents experienced workplace bullying 18 months prior to the study; this is 58% higher than the general population. Within this context, the Hollis 2015 study also confirmed that women face bullying at higher rates. Seventy-one percent of women respondents experienced workplace bullying.

The American Council on Education (ACE) has reported that only 26% of the higher education presidents are women ("ACE Convenes Discussion on Women in Higher

Education Leadership" July 16, 2012). However, since 2006, women have earned more doctorates than men ("Women in the United States" June 10, 2014). The career path to the presidency typically involves full professorship before assuming the role of chief academic officer. As of 2007, only 38% of chief academic officers were women. In 2011, only 42% of professors with full-time employment were women and women only held 28% of full professorships (Curtis 2011). Even though women comprise more than 50% of the workforce, they still remain locked out of positions that lead to executive leadership in higher education.

As previously mentioned, as women have sought workplace responsibilities and positions typically held by men, they have increasingly become the target of harassment and bullying. As women do not typically hold positions of power in higher education, this analysis will consider the methods are women using to find relief from workplace bullying. Hence, the purpose of this analysis is to examine women's reactions to workplace bullying in American higher education.

Central Research Question

This secondary data analysis considers participants' specific reactions to workplace bullying. Potential responses include: reporting the issue to their supervisor, leaving the department, taking more sick time, isolating oneself, or resigning. As a greater number of women enter the higher education workforce, the central research question for this analysis is:

What is the relationship between gender and the target's reaction to workplace bullying in American higher education?

Given the five elements examined as potential reactions, the study has the five corresponding hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1

H1. There is a relationship between the gender of the target and the response to report the issue to the supervisor.

Ho There is no relationship between the gender of the target and the response to report the issue to the supervisor.

Hypothesis 2

H1. There is a relationship between the gender of the target and the response to leave the department.

Ho There is no relationship between the gender of the target and the response to leave the department.

Hypothesis 3

H1. There is a relationship between the gender of the target and the response to take more sick time.

Ho There is no relationship between the gender of the target and the response to take more sick time.

Hypothesis 4

H1. There is a relationship between the gender of the target and the response to isolate oneself.

Ho There is no relationship between the gender of the target and the response to isolate oneself.

Hypothesis 5

H1. There is a relationship between the gender of the target and the response to resign.

Ho There is no relationship between the gender of the target and the response to resign.

Methods

Data was collected using a 35-question instrument that asked respondents from 175 colleges and universities about their experiences pertaining to workplace bullying. In the initial study, the instrument was beta tested by five academics in higher education. The findings were reported in descriptive statistics and confirmed that 62% of respondents were affected by workplace bullying. A closer examination of the women respondents (n=281) revealed that 71% of this subset faced workplace bullying. A secondary examination of the existing data set focused on the response of women participants to workplace bullying in higher education.

This secondary analysis of the existing data set specifically analyzed the question: How did the TARGET react to being bullied? The possible responses within the instrument were: 1) Report to supervisors; 2) Leave the department (transferred internally); 3) Take more sick time; 4) Isolate oneself; 5) Resign. The respondents' answers were divided by gender and coded. First, a contingency table was developed to ascertain if a discrepancy existed. Once the discrepancy in frequency was highlighted, a Chi Square examination was applied using IBM's SPSS software.

Delimitations

Any researcher can choose to control for various elements of a design.

Demographics, data collection methods, and sample typically are delimitations of a study.

This examination was limited to an existing data set on workplace bullying in American higher education. The secondary analysis emerges from a previous study on this topic.

Limitations

The sample was limited to data gathered from a previous study. Specifically, this secondary analysis was about women's responses to workplace bullying. In turn, the analysis was built on a response to the question: How did the TARGET react to being bullied?

Findings

The frequency of responses by women and men related to: 1) Report to supervisors; 2) Leave the department (transferred internally); 3) Take more sick time; 4) Isolate oneself; 5) Resign (see Table 1).

Table 1: Response to workplace bullying proportions related to gender

Response to bully	Men	Women
Report to supervisor	25.42%	37.8%
Leave the department	16.95%	17.42%
Take more sick time	25.42%	23.6%
Isolate oneself	49.15%%	45.51%
Resign	23.73%	28.65%

The response “report to supervisor” had close to a 13% discrepancy in proportion by gender. The subsequent responses: “leave the department,” “take more sick time,” “isolate oneself,” and “resign” had similar proportions. If there were no differences in proportion with regard to gender, the rationale for additional statistical testing would not exist. However, the gender discrepancy pertaining to “report to supervisor” warranted further investigation; therefore, a Chi Square test was undertaken to examine if the null hypothesis should be rejected.

Table 2: Cross-tabulation of four-year schools

		Variables					
		1.00	2.00	3.00	4.00	5.00	Total
Men	Count	15	28	11	16	14	84
	Expected	19.3	25.7	9.9	13.7	15.3	84.0
	Count						
Women	Count	67	81	31	42	51	272
	Expected	62.7	83.3	32.1	44.3	49.7	272.0
	Count						
Total	Count	82	109	42	58	65	356
	Expected	82.0	109.0	42.0	58.0	65.0	356.0
	Count						

Note: 1 = Report to supervisor; 2 = Isolate oneself; 3 = Leave the department; 4 = Take more sick time; 5 = Resign.

The Chi Square examination concluded that women were more likely than men to seek structural solutions by reporting bullying to their immediate supervisors. Variable “1.00” in the first column represented the targets’ response to “report to supervisor.” While no demographic is exempt from workplace bullying (Glasø and Notelaers 2012; McCarthy

2013) and the breadth of reactions was duly noted, women sought out formal reporting structures to alleviate the effects of bullying more than men. These findings were consistent with a finding from a previous study, which states “women are more likely to report being targets for sexual harassment than men, regardless of race, class, or occupation” (Kolman 2004, 153).

Consequently, as women were the disproportionate target of workplace bullying in higher education, and as bullying had a deleterious impact on any target’s career, formal structures and policies should be in place at the organizational level to not only create a healthy workplace for all, but to pave the way for equity and support for women who seek formal structures to resolve workplace bullying.

Additional Analysis

After undertaking an analysis of the higher education data, which only examined data from four-year colleges and universities, the researcher also considered data from a 2014 data collection in which community college administrators were asked the same questions regarding workplace bullying. The researcher used the same instrument from the 2012 data collection to examine workplace bullying in community colleges. The findings from the 2014 data collection, which surveyed participants from 137 community colleges across the United States, also revealed that 62% of respondents were affected by workplace bullying.

The blended consideration of the four-year population and the community college population analyzes response of 527 participants: men and women from both four-year colleges and universities and the two-year community college sector. The combined analysis yielded the same results to the question: How does the TARGET react to being bullied? This

analysis strengthens the finding that women are more likely to turn to supervisors for relief against workplace bullying on campus than men (see Table 3).

Table 3: Gender cross-tabulation of combined two- year & four- year schools

		Variables					
		1.00	2.00	3.00	4.00	5.00	Total
Men	Count	24	43	15	23	22	127
	Expected	30.6	38.6	14.7	20.5	22.7	127.0
	Count						
Women	Count	103	117	46	62	72	400
	Expected	96.4	121.4	46.3	64.5	71.3	400.0
	Count						
Total	Count	127	160	61	85	94	527
	Expected	127.0	160.0	61.0	85.0	94.0	527.0
	Count						

Note: 1= Report to supervisor; 2 = Isolate oneself; 3 = Leave the department; 4 = Take more sick time; 5 = Resign.

Similar to Table 2, the variable “1.00” in the first column of Table 3 represents the response to “report to supervisor.” The count of men having this response to workplace bullying is lower, with 24 instead of the expected 30.6. This analysis shows that 103 women reported to supervisor, which is above the expected count of 96.4. When both four-year and two-year American higher education is analyzed, this trend is consistent; women are more likely to report workplace bullying to their supervisor than men. As supervisors are part of the formal structure of any institution, and are bound by institutional policies, higher education should

seek to develop and apply anti-bullying policies, which would be particularly helpful to women.

Discussion

Women's behavior in relation to workplace bullying is analogous to women's behavior in the evolution of sexual harassment policies. Women's formal complaints to organizations emphasized gender-based injustices at work and led to more appropriate application of Title VII legislation. Workplace bullying in the United States has yet to be prohibited; nonetheless, women's complaints and insistence on formal policies can forge change for a healthy workplace. Gender-based harassment has become more sophisticated, changing from the quid pro quo behaviors of the 1970s to the establishment of hostile workplace language in the 1980s. Once harassers eliminate the overt gender-based distinction, the behavior can be recast as bullying. Without formal organizational policies to curtail any type of harassment, women will continue to be subjected to workplace bullying, as they traditionally possess the least amount of power in higher education.

Recommendations for Future Studies

The history of the evolution and application of sexual harassment and sexual discrimination legislation shows that women are more likely to formally report gender-based harassment given they typically have less power in an organization. As this applies to workplace bullying, the Chi Square analysis of four-year colleges and university, as well as the combined Chi Square analysis of four-year colleges and universities and two-year

community colleges, shows the same predilection in women working in higher education.

Accordingly, recommendations for future research include:

- 1). Analyze the rate of workplace bullying at four-year colleges and universities and two-year community colleges where a woman is president.
- 2). Analyze the rate of workplace bullying at four-year colleges and universities and two-year community colleges where women equally share in executive power.
- 3). Analyze the rate of workplace bullying at four-year colleges and universities and two-year community colleges where formal anti-bullying policies are in place in addition to policies prohibiting sexual harassment and sexual discrimination.

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