MALAYSIAN SPEAK-OUT THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF MISCONDUCT AT WORK

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ABSTRACT

This article using a narrative approach aims to investigate the psychological impact for victim of misconduct at work. Interviews were conducted with 12 participants self-identified as victims. Themes identified in the study were: Frustration, demoralisation, pressure and loss of confidence. The study emphasised the importance of knowing the psychological impact for the toleration of misconduct at work by victims in Malaysia which might provide insightful information for researchers in non-Western society.

Keywords: Psychological, Stress, Misconduct

INTRODUCTION

Harassment and bullying at work can often lead to a wide range of physical symptoms along with psychological turmoil. Various physical health effects have been previously reported (e.g. Hoel, Sparks & Cooper, 2001; Lewis, Coursol & Wahl, 2002; Yildirim & Yildirim, 2007; Zapf & Gross, 2001) but overall it is not easy to see predictable patterns emerging; it would appear that different individuals respond with different symptoms. One of the key psychological symptoms of harassment or bullying is stress and depression. Main, Glozier and Wright (2005) found work absence was a better measure of the impact or 'cost' of stress within the workplace. Researchers from King's College Hospital in 2005 have identified that the cumulative negative stress caused by bullying can contribute to depression and were the main reason for absenteeism is sickness. Heraclides, Chandola, Witte and Burner (2009) concluded that psychosocial work stress was an independent predictor. Further research needs to be done, as Cuijpers, Van Straten, Andersson and Van Oppen (2008) argued that there is also a tendency for depression and anxiety to evolve into emotional problems that can lead to the individual having trouble at work.

Stroud (2008) determined that much time spent at the workplace, struggling to cope within a job and not seeking help can contribute to suicide ideation. Longer working hours is a factor related to increased tension, aggressiveness and even changes in dietary intake (Pimenta *et al.*, 2008). A very recent comprehensive meta-analysis study conducted by Bowling, Beehr (2006); Bowling *et al.*, (2010) indicated that workplace bullying had a moderately positive association with depression and negative emotions at work, and negative associations with life satisfaction and self-esteem.

METHOD

Data collection

The data collection was conducted using semi-structured interviews in a separate meeting place for each participant. Twelve participants were provided with these settings in order to facilitate a safe and supportive environment to talk in depth about this sensitive issue. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. All real names were modified to protect participants' confidentiality.

ANALYSIS

The analysis of the data adhered to the established procedure of narrative analysis. To begin with, the researcher viewed the 12 interview transcripts to identify items that pointed to the existence of potential themes. This involved a case by case analysis, followed by a cross-case analysis of shared themes (see Table 1).

Table 1: Psychological impact of workplace harassment experiences by the participants

Workplace Harassment	Psychological Impact	• Frustration • Demoralisation • Pressure, stress, tension and distress • Loss of confidence and self-esteem

FINDINGS

Psychological impact

All of them have much experience of different kinds of workplace harassment while working in their respective work stations. Four sub-themes were extracted from the psychological impact theme and these are: 1) Frustration, 2) Demoralisation, 3) Pressure, stress, tension and distress and 4) Loss of confidence and self-esteem.

Frustration

Frustration is an outcome of many accumulated negative emotions, which originate either from the mind itself or from surrounding external circumstances (Shakeel *et al.*, 2011). It is essential to note that these negative emotions are immensely powerful and the causes are more mental than physical. In his Model of Organisational Frustration, Spector (1978) has added that a feeling of frustration can lead to antisocial behaviour at work. This sub-theme proved to have enormous negative implications on the participants' well-being, both mentally and physically. Half of the participants in this study reported that frustrations in their lives came entirely from their work environment, but such frustrations were the result of a wide range of causes, such as sexual harassment, demotion and verbal harassment. This theme captured participants' intense feelings of disappointment. The following extract conveys a sense of frustration felt.

Participant 9 (frustration)

"I work as a technician and working almost 10 years in this factory. With diploma and experience that I have, I supposed to have a chance being promoted as supervisor. Unfortunately, I always give my idea and confront for what I think wasn't right. Sometimes the management took my idea in solving the factory problem. Compared with the others who always play-act obsequiousness attitude in front of the management. I frustrated with this kind of work culture ….or Malay culture……"

Participant 10 (frustration)

"I think…power…there've been there for a long time…everybody need to listen to them. Instead they've listen to you. Just this kind of attitude…in my opinion they have a close minded attitude…because they won't listen…they don't listen to others especially juniors…just listen what they said….. to talk about instead of cut…straight away…our idea."

Frustration can take many forms and can have serious consequences in any organisation. In the present study, some participants experienced harassment based on prejudice and favouritism. Lack of appreciation had the most significant effect on participants. The constant observations witnessed that the participants found themselves under and devaluation from people around them. Participants' frustration displays itself in a range of feelings which could be categorised as minor depression, including low mood most of the time, loss of pleasure in daily activities, difficulty in concentrating, anxiety, and feelings of worthlessness, unhappiness and guilt. Such feelings have been comprehensively referred to by Kahn (2008) in his article: 'Diagnosis and Referral of Workplace Depression.' The combination of feelings change the way participants see themselves, their lives and the people around them. To escape frustrations, they have to accept the actual position in which they find themselves, instead of pinning their hopes on an unrealistic and perhaps impossible alternative ideal. Those participants, who can cope, adjust accordingly and move on with their lives. However, sadly, the majority of people who can't deal with such frustration walk out and embark upon a new career. Those that stay and fail to cope are sometimes faced with extremely negative consequences such as high levels of distress. Although many participants felt frustration at some time, it merely interfered with their everyday lives for relatively short periods. In other words, they had effective coping mechanisms.

Demoralisation

Demoralisation can be prevalent among people who are depressed. Frank (1974) has described demoralisation as a persistent inability to cope, together with associated feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, meaninglessness, subjective incompetence and diminished self-esteem. This discouragement is characterised by a sense of ineffectiveness through loss of purpose, pleasure or interest in one's job and daily activities. As far as these interviews were concerned, half of participants expressed an occasional desire to give up their work. Verbal harassment, lack of respect and 'obsequiousness syndrome' were the most significant behaviours that led to demoralisation for them.

Participant 7 (demoralisation)

"I discovered that the culture in here, they underestimate female ability to manage the department…..I have a strong feelings that after completed my study they will appoint me to be the Head of the department. I have no intention and courage to accept it after seeing my friend be treated in merciless way and took her life….."

Demoralisation has been portrayed as a sense of

surrender and disheartenment in the participants' careers. One participant's experience was that the feeling of helplessness, when not assisted, led to hopelessness, making the victim unable to cope. For that reason the victim felt severely trapped and unaware of what to do (Participant 7). As a result, there may have been a perception of loss of direction, or sense of purpose, or confusion about her role, leading to feelings of uselessness within her designated position. Furthermore, a participant's feeling of ineptness and reduced self-worth at work is heightened because self-competence comes to be regarded as less important for career development. According to the participants, the act of attempting to win favour through flattering powerful people and thereby gain promotion and benefits is common practice.

Due to this 'obsequiousness syndrome' in the organisation, participants felt that they were devalued and thus their capability and performance at work was almost irrelevant with regards to promotion or progression. For example we refer to Participant 9 who has been loyal to the company for almost 10 years but not getting a promotion. After all he is glad to relocate himself and saying,

Participant 9 (demoralisation)

"….I prefer to get transfer to another department for new experience and environment in every 2 years."

For severely demoralised participants, moral and psychological support needed to be given to assist them to cope with the adjustment. Even in the absence of treatment, suffering can be substantially relieved by a restoration of self-esteem and self-efficacy that comes through increased competence and human connection and interaction. The greatest support came from family and close friends (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011; Lutgen-Sandvik & Tracy, 2012) who helped them to remain in the organisation. In fact, most of them showed enough maturity and patience to not let circumstances frustrate them or at least to not let the frustration demoralise them.

Pressure, stress, tension and distress

The invisible weapons that can affect bodily functions are often associated with the related phenomena of pressure, anxiety, stress, tension and distress. People suffering from these conditions are unable to think clearly, but the effects are not only reflected in thinking and feeling but also physical functionality. Both descriptions below give the impression that the pressure contributes to health malfunction among the participants in this study.

Participant 6 (pressure, stress, tension and distress)

"…..I'm losing weight because of the stress, physically…"

Workplace harassment has been shown to have a negative impact on employee wellbeing (Niedl, 1996; Rayner & Cooper, 1997; Zapf, Knoz & Kulla, 1996) and work related stress. This appears to be true for the participants in this study. However, pressure and stress affect people in different ways and what one individual finds traumatic can be normal to another. Therefore, different work environment characteristics are of differing importance to harassment in different professions. In this study, participants felt this quite intensely and elements of unpleasantness became apparent in the way they spoke of their feelings of pressure, stress, tension and distress engendered by others. Damaged human relations at work were the most common contributing cause to the listed feelings. For example, Einarsen, Raknes and Matthiesen (1994) reported a stronger relation between dissatisfaction with leadership and harassment for administrative workers interacting with their superiors on a daily basis. The situation experienced by Participant 11 supported the statement by Einarsen *et al.*, (1994) about the stiffness relationship when she mentions:

Participant 11 (pressure, stress, tension and distress-interaction)

"…..because when I talked to him directly because of my character which is very straight forward may be I'm not that diplomatic or not diplomatic enough to the Malay or according to the Malay culture…which is usually diplomatic than other cultures I think..he fined it threatening and then he would refused to do it or he replied he said things back to me which is not nice sometimes."

What is more, although substantive task conflict has been shown to increase performance under certain circumstances, affective relationship conflict, which harassment and bullying usually is, does not have such positive effects (Jehn, 1995). Human relations have been the greatest cause of such stress and pressure. Among participants of this study, victims of sexual harassment experienced a constant sense of anxiety that such intimidation would occur again. Participants felt scared and pressure to be alone because of misconduct especially body language and physical contact which prevented them from concentrating on their work (Davenport, Schwartz & Elliott, 1999). Participant 1 and 2 provided a mixed feeling on their experience regarding this issue.

Participant 1 (pressure, stress, tension and distress)

"I don't respect him at all. I feel scared to be alone in the office. He might take advantage on me……so I have to be careful on that….."

Participant 2 (pressure, stress, tension and distress)

"As a trainee…..the first time….I try to stay back at the office to complete my task. I felt very……..very uncomfortable and aaa…when he's around …..I try not to …..you know not to stay back anymore…..I'm afraid that you know something bad will happen or when friends are not around…"

Tension also emerged in this study when they were given an excessive workload some of which was not their own designated work, and in general when they were also faced with conflicting expectations of superiors demanding too much of them. Working extended hours and therefore having less time for a private life made matters worse. Being a middle manager created distress due to a lack of respect from both superiors and inferior level employees. This excerpt indicated that Participant 6 work schedule had a life of its own.

Participant 6 (pressure, stress, tension and distress)

"Since we are trainees…… then we have been push to…..to this project in very… ….aaaa adhoc. So we have to work almost 20 hours, less private life and then we just have the salary about, I still remember about less than RM 600 a month……….we are not a child but fresh graduate….we just want experience….."

Influences of gender and age were both significant to the problem too. In addition, feelings of misery due to being attacked physically and verbally made them uneasy with the situation. Participants immediately and spontaneously agreed that the threat had reduced their self-respect. Stress brought on by unethical conduct at work is not only detected while in the office but also at home. Many studies have explored the relationship between job pressure or stress at work and possible ailments with findings suggesting associations with disturbed relationships between family and friends; communication patterns, increased irritability, and negativity are predictably going to strain even the best of relation (Duffy & Sperry, 2007). Yet, so far, in this study the level of participants' distress caused by the phenomenon was rated as moderate. Most participants can cope with their situation but in their own way, for example resign, transfer out of the place and try to ignore the environment.

Loss of confidence and self-esteem

This theme revealed that the effects of harassment and bullying can drive the victim to feel thoughts of depression, and also lower self-confidence and self-esteem. Kirkpatrick and Ellis (2001) cite that confidence and self esteem are based on life experience and self-perception is reflected in the attitudes of others. But both aspects are also socially constructed (Reeve, 2000, cited in Randle, 2003). In this study, participants felt they were worrying about inappropriate behaviour and work related performance issues a considerable amount of time in the workplace. This study has supported a study conducted by Aaron and Dry (1992) - which stated that young women are less confident when dealing with authority people in the workplace. Both descriptions below were aligned with the study conducted by Aaron and Dry (1992).

Participant 1 (loss of confidence and self-esteem)

"We have morning meeting….at 9.00 am…. daily routine for staff in this company. He tried to stand close to me…..actually I would say body contact I feel disgusting but what can I do as trainee?"

Participant 4 (loss of confidence and self-esteem)

"…..I just graduated…..I can't really stand the behaviour of the Boss……I didn't get the salary that he promised me…. So I left and jobless about few months…."

In this case, participants were more capable of handling stress and pressure. Their qualifications may have contributed towards their ability to survive through conflict. They maintain that the greatest challenges to their confidence levels and self-esteem came when they were facing a situation in the workplace as trainees or junior employees. Consequences of harassment and bullying made them feel a sense of inferiority, self-doubt, and being unfavoured, coupled with unrealistic expectations from management as to appropriate standards and opinions.

Participant 12 (loss of confidence and self-esteem-junior employee)

"When we give the idea, they assume that we are more capable than them as junior staff. Then the situation may affect our increment or bonus. So the best thing to do is keep silent………."

In one case, a participant stated that the situation in her friend's workplace was causing her extreme misery. Due to an inability to cope with pressure and stress, she ended up not taking care of herself and started to believe the negative comments about herself due to her fear of criticism. After two years, and having suffered

depression, chronic fatigue, and loss of self confidence, finally and tragically she took her own life. Having witnessed the occurrences of bullying of her good friend, the participant has reflected on her own self-esteem and become unmotivated to get promoted to lead in the department. As Participant 7 mentions, she is not chasing a higher position after witnessing her friend's experience.

Participant 7 (loss of confidence and self)

"……I have no intention and courage to accept it after seing my friend be treated in that way and took her life….."

Overall, it has become obvious from the present research interviews that the presence of harassment in work has a great potential to reduce confidence and lower self-esteem. In general, when we have a healthy level of confidence and self-esteem we have a tendency to engage in activities that we enjoy with someone close to us. A point made clear by Anderson (1993) who highlighted that the more positive a person, the more positive they will feel about others. The sense of not being happy in the work environment was particularly strong in these participants' account.

CONCLUSION

This pilot study has important implications for identifying a variety of forms of inappropriate behaviour as workplace-problematic in Malaysia. Any unwanted conduct is clearly an organisational rather than an individual problem. An understanding of both the antecedents of the behaviour and the range of associated symptoms explains how best to address the phenomenon. The findings undoubtedly validate the importance of assessing the individual, as well as social and organisational aspects. Equally important as the antecedents, are the consequences of inappropriate behaviour, especially in terms of psychological well-being (organisation and members). This study has provided information that will enable researcher to decide the best research design for the larger study in Malaysia.

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