

Relationships Between Workplace Bullying, Resilience, Depressive Symptoms and Romanian Employees' Strain*

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The concept of resilience is understood as a person's capacity to hold up, recover, and come out stronger after facing a situation affecting integrity. The present article aims to verify the mediation roles of resilience and depressive symptoms on the relationship between workplace bullying and strain. A total of 172 Romanian employees participated in the present study by completing online questionnaires referring to workplace bullying, resilience, depressive symptoms, and strain. The results showed that not only resilience but also depressive symptoms mediated the relationship between workplace bullying and strain. These results showed that those employees who have higher levels of resilience have lower levels of physical strain when they are confronted with workplace bullying behaviours, and they will have higher levels of strain if they also experience depressive symptoms. The findings of the present study can help human resources practitioners improve their anti-bullying programmes not only by developing resilient individuals in their workplaces but also by helping the organization to develop as a resilient company.

Keywords: workplace bullying, resilience, depressive symptoms, physical strain, mental strain, mediation model

Introduction

Globalization is the main reason why many organizations are operating across the world, and consequently organizations are modifying the way they operate internally. Organizations are hiring a more qualified workforce, which now has the opportunity to choose where to work (Orozco-Jimenez & Lai, 2015). Therefore, organizations are facing additional managerial operations such as increasing foreign assignments, work with different cultures and overseeing the movement of jobs to countries with low-cost labour (Robbins & Judge, 2012).

Monks, Smith, Naylor, Barter, Ireland, and Coyne (2009) state that bullying is a critical problem that has been studied for the last 30 years in different areas such as schools, prisons and the workplace, and researchers, employers and practitioners are taking it extremely seriously.

Bullying at work is affecting 48% of all workers psychologically or physically (McSwain, 2014) and is also affecting organizations in diverse areas such as performance, costs, turnover and others, and, in order to contribute to minimizing its impact on people or to eradicate it, authors have taken it as their field of study

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(Orockzo-Jimenez & Lai, 2015). In the United Kingdom it has been estimated that the 53% of employees have been bullied at least once in their working life (Porteous, 2002). On the other hand, the organizations have lost in total 19 million working days and £2 billion in revenue each year (Health and Safety Commission, 2006).

Djurkovic, McCormarck and Casimir (2008) agreed that these issues affect the life of the employees even seeming to have a negative impact on their private life as well as their social life. Therefore, everyone within the company (CEO, managers, supervisors and employees themselves) has the responsibility of reducing physical and psychological risks to employees (Orockzo-Jimenez & Lai, 2015).

A meta-analysis of 18 studies in the field of workplace bullying (Orockzo-Jimenez & Lai, 2015) has found several similarities. The first one refers to the stressors that result from bullying. Authors mention stressors such as role conflict, role ambiguity, role and work overload, job insecurity, low job control, low job resources, bad working conditions, lack of skills, sudden work changes, lack of task-related feedback (Appelbaum, Semerijan, & Mohan, 2012; Astrauskaite, Kern, & Notelaers, 2014; Balducci, Cecchin, & Fraccaroli, 2012; Mathisen, Ogaard, & Einarsen, 2012; Notelaers, Baillien, DeWitte, Einarsen, & Vermunt, 2012). According to the above authors, these stress factors will be present in the workplace environment where there is a lack of supervision, where hierarchy is more important and where there is a chaotic and poor work climate and culture.

These result in the victims being psychologically and physically injured. Among the psychological consequences were found effects such as depressive and behavioural disorders (Appelbaum et al., 2012; Balducci et al., 2012; Devonish, 2013; Kivimaki, Elovainio, Vartia, Vahtera, & Keltikangas-Jarvinen, 2003; Pomeroy, 2013), struggle for existential continuity, stability and security (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2012), suicidal and homicidal tendencies, post-traumatic-stress-disorders, low self-esteem, high social anxiety and neuroticism (Devonish, 2013; Mathisen et al., 2012; Pomeroy, 2013), concentration difficulties, emotional extenuation and discouragement (Camero, Martinez, & Sanchez-Mangos, 2012). Regarding the physical effects, authors found sleeping problems, overall fatigue (Camero et al., 2012; Pomeroy, 2013), loss of appetite, headaches and panic attacks (A. Khan & R. Khan, 2012).

At an organizational level, an organization's productivity starts to decrease as a consequence of lack of involvement in job tasks, high rates of absenteeism and high rates of mental health problems in employees. In the worst cases, the targeted employees leave the organization which leads to the higher costs of recruitment processes (Leymann, 1990; Leymann, 1996). In order to improve organization functionality and existence, researchers in organizational psychology interested in workplace bullying topics and interpersonal relationships at work started to promote the role of resilience in organizational contexts.

The idea of having efficient employees is increasingly promoted in organizational psychology literature which showed that resilient employees contribute to an organization's health and existence. Knowing which factors are contributing to a long-lasting workplace functionality, it was shown that workplace bullying is a negative phenomenon and that exposed employees become unproductive and leave the organization in the end.

Knowing the role of resilient people for organizations, studies in the workplace bullying field started to link resilience and workplace bullying in order to improve organization functionality.

Resilience in the Case of Exposure to Workplace Bullying

The term resilience describes relative resistance to adversity (Rutter, 2006). Opinion is divided on the origins and characteristics of resilience, with the debate centring on whether resilience is a stable personality trait, a set of constructive coping mechanisms or a process of emotional adaptation (Hunter & Warren, 2013).

Most definitions, however, refer to successful or positive adaptation to adversity (Luthar, Chicchetti, & Becker, 2000), without residual significant psychological or physiological disruption (Serry, Holman, & Silver, 2010). “Resilient” responses to adversity are considered to be habitual patterns of cognition, behaviour and emotion that consistently draw on effective resources to reduce risk to self (Luthar et al., 2000) rather than isolated or occasional episodes of effective coping. In other words, resilience is the ability of an individual to respond positively and consistently to adversity, using effective coping strategies (Hunter & Warren, 2013).

Resilience in the workplace was defined as employees’ ability to bounce back after experiencing adversity (i.e., workplace bullying acts) without manifesting any psychological disorders. Resilience is that process which allows employees to develop as a consequence of adversity, becoming stronger.

Organizational resilience was defined as being the organization’s ability to cope with any threaten to its scope and good functionality, to quickly recover and to develop after adversity.

According to previous research (Sauer, 2013; Van Haugten, 2013), resilience acts as a personal resource for victims of workplace bullying situations. So far, few studies have had any interest in studying the role of resilience in the relationship between workplace bullying targets and their health symptoms.

Research interest in studying resilience to workplace bullying is still new and this relationship is as yet understudied (Ungar, 2011). In one study, Rutter (2006) showed that victims of workplace bullying presented symptoms of post-traumatic growth, becoming thus more resilient after experiencing workplace bullying situations. Furthermore, Sauer (2013) tested the mediation role of resilience on the relationship between workplace bullying and health sector employees’ burnout. The results showed that the more resilient employees were, the less burnout symptoms they felt. In the same year, Van Haugten (2013) revealed that victims of workplace bullying labelled themselves as being stronger, more socially skilled and more socially intelligent after surviving workplace bullying situations. One year later, Fracarro (2014) evidenced that victims of workplace bullying who presented higher levels of resilience also had higher levels of self-efficiency in work tasks despite the adversity experienced. Moreover, Naranayan and Betts (2014) showed that persons who had higher levels of resilience recovered more quickly after experiencing bullying acts than those with lower levels of resilience. In Romania, two recent studies (Maidaniuc-Chirilă, 2015a, 2015c) evidenced the mediation role of resilience on the relationship between workplace bullying and Romanian employees’ physical and mental strain. According to these results, the more resilient workplace bullying victims were, the less mental and physical strain they felt. Furthermore, another Romanian study (Maidaniuc-Chirilă, 2015b) revealed that being resilient not only led to lower levels of physical and mental strain but also lower levels of emotionally-focused coping strategies. In other words the more resilient people were, the less they used coping strategies focused on emotions, and the less mentally and physically strained they felt.

The present research tests a mediation model similar to that tested by Maidaniuc-Chirilă (2015b) but having as a second mediator employee’ depressive symptoms rather than coping strategy such as focus on an venting of emotions. In other words, this study tries to explore the role of pre-existing depressive symptoms in the levels of mental and physical strain of employees exposed to workplace bullying.

The Aim of the Study

The first aim was to examine the relationships existing between workplace bullying, resilience, depressive symptoms and Romanian employees’ mental and physical strain.

The second aim goal was to propose a mediation model of the relationships between workplace bullying, resilience, depressive symptoms and strain having, as mediators, resilience and depressive symptoms.

Methods

Participants

A total of 172 (114 female; 58 male) Romanian employees participated by completing the online questionnaires measuring workplace bullying, psychological resilience and depressive symptoms. They ranged from 22 to 62 years old ($M = 33.25$; $SD = 8.92$). Their work experience ranged from 3 to 240 months ($M = 44.06$; $SD = 49.72$), and their highest level of education included a bachelor's degree (63), master's degree (74) and doctoral degree (21). Their employers included public institutions (47), private institutions (47), private firms (61) and non-governmental institutions (11). Their employers varied in size: under 10 employees (37 participants), 10–40 employees (42), 41–200 employees (41), 201–1,000 employees (23) and over 1,000 employees (24).

This present study was presented as being one interested in the dynamics of interpersonal relationships at work, and employees having lower scores on resilience, higher scores on workplace bullying and higher levels of mental and physical strain were considered for the present study.

Instruments

Workplace bullying. We measured workplace bullying with the Romanian version of Einarsen, Hoel and Notelaers' (2009) Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised (Chirilă & Constantin, 2014). The Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised (NAQ-R) has 22 items referring to 22 acts of negative behaviour, grouped in three dimensions (i.e., intimidation, person-related bullying and work-related bullying). The response to this questionnaire was given on a five-point Likert scale ranging from never (1) to daily (5). The Cronbach's alpha for the entire questionnaire is $\alpha = 0.93$, with $\alpha = 0.78$ for person-related bullying, $\alpha = 0.81$ for context-related bullying, and $\alpha = 0.82$ for intimidation.

Psychological resilience. We measured resilience with the resilience scale developed by Wagnild (2009). This questionnaire is formed from 14 items measured on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). Cronbach's alpha for the entire scale is $\alpha = 0.86$. The questionnaire concludes with another seven yes or no items referring to depressive symptoms, diet, substance abuse, alcohol consumption, ideal weight, physical exercising as well as general health and wellness.

Mental and physical strain. Mental strain was assessed with seven items from the Occupational Stress Inventory (Evers, Frese, & Cooper, 2000). These items were translated into Romanian using the back-translation method. The internal consistency for all seven items is 0.61.

Physical strain was assessed with five items from the Occupational Stress Inventory (Evers et al., 2000). All five items were translated into Romanian using the back-translation method. The internal consistency is 0.69.

Procedure

The questionnaires were placed in a specific order. The first questionnaire was the Romanian version of the Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised; the second was the COPE Inventory measuring all coping strategies; the third was the Resilience Scale and the fourth was composed of the two scales measuring mental and physical strain from the Occupational Stress Inventory. Participants were told to answer the last three questionnaires in the context of being exposed to or encountering negative acts in their workplaces.

Only those employees with work experience at their present job of over six months were selected. They were contacted through e-mail. Personal e-mails were sent to them explaining the scope of the present study and the possibility of participating in a training programme designed to increase their level of stress resistance and their levels of personal resilience. A total of 5,000 personal e-mails were sent to employees all over the country between August 2014 and January 2015 and only a total of 172 employees responded positively to the request.

Statistics

The results of this present study were obtained with the aid of SPSS 17.00 (for Pearson correlations) and AMOS 20.00 for designing the mediation model and computing for absolute and fit indices, for regression weights and for direct and indirect effects.

Results

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations Among Variables

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
Workplace bullying	1.74	0.59	1				
Resilience	5.88	0.69	-0.181*	1			
Depressive symptoms	3.23	0.62	0.228***	-0.282***	1		
Physical strain	1.84	0.54	0.451***	-0.169*	0.388***	1	
Mental strain	2.09	0.43	0.282***	-0.364***	0.529***	0.436***	1

Notes. *, $p < 0.05$; **, $p < 0.01$; ***, $p < 0.001$, $N = 172$ Romanian employees.

Workplace bullying correlates significantly and negatively with resilience and significantly and positively with depressive symptoms, mental strain, and physical strain.

Resilience correlates significantly and negatively with depressive symptoms, mental strain, and physical strain.

Depressive symptoms correlate positively and significantly with physical strain and mental strain.

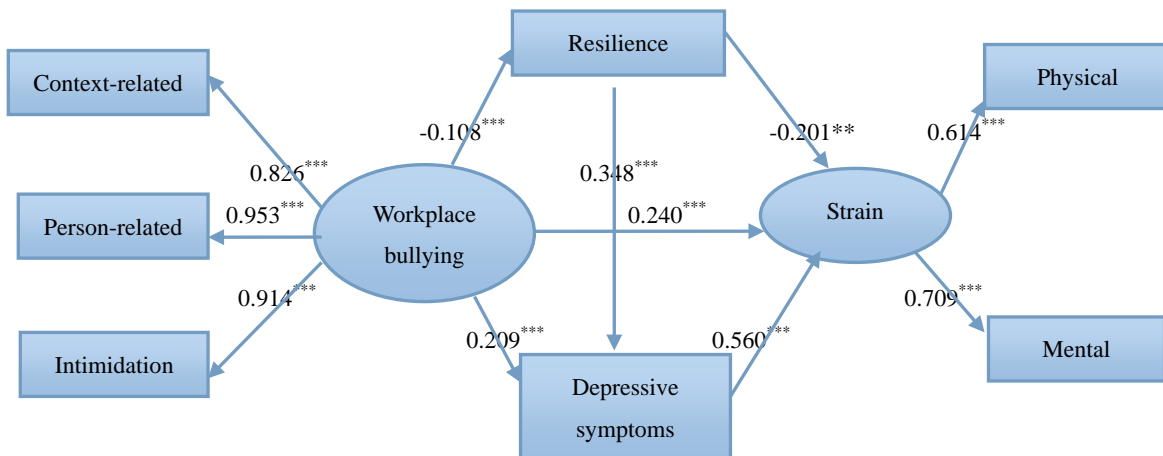


Figure 1. The mediation model proposed. Notes. *, $p < 0.05$; **, $p < 0.01$; ***, $p < 0.001$.

Fit indices for the model. $\chi_2(10) = 24.161$, $p = 0.107$, RMR = 0.020; RMSEA = 0.089[0.045; 0.138]; GFI = 0.963; AGFI = 0.901; NFI = 0.959; IFI = 0.976; CFI = 0.975. The fit indices for the model show that this model is supported by the empirical data.

The results presented in the mediation model showed that resilience acted like a mediator of the relationship between workplace bullying and Romanian employees' strain. The fact of being resilient when facing acts of workplace bullying helps the employees to experience lower levels of mental and physical strain. In this case, resilience acted like a personal protective factor in case of exposure to workplace bullying. Furthermore, depressive symptoms also acted like a mediator. According to these results the fact of being exposed to acts of workplace bullying leads to high levels of physical and mental strain, and the levels of physical and mental strain are even higher when the exposed employee has pre-existing depressive symptoms. In other words, higher levels of depressive symptoms act like a risk factor for the employee in case of experiencing workplace bullying behaviours.

Discussions

The aim of the present study was to explore the relationships existing between exposure to workplace bullying, psychological resilience, depressive symptoms and strain.

There are significant correlations among workplace bullying, resilience, depressive symptoms and Romanian employees' mental and physical strain. The more people encounter workplace bullying acts, the more strained and depressive they are. Furthermore, the more people face acts of workplace bullying, the less resilient they become.

Previous research (Appelbaum et al., 2012; Balducci et al., 2012; Devonish, 2013; Djurkovic et al., 2008; McSwain, 2014; Pomeroy, 2013) has shown that the fact of being exposed to workplace bullying has a direct impact on individuals' levels of well-being and physical health. The present research has studied not only the direct impact of workplace bullying on Romanian employees' physical and mental strain but also its indirect impact through resilience and depressive symptoms. Previous research (Fraccaro, 2014; Maidaniuc-Chirilă, 2015a/1015b/2015c; Naranayan & Betts, 2014; Sauer, 2013; Van Haugten, 2013) has evidenced that employees exposed to workplace bullying experience stress symptoms, post-traumatic-stress disorders, burnout, depressive symptoms, anxiety, mental and physical strain. There were also studies (Maidaniuc-Chirilă, 2015a/2015b/2015c; Sauer, 2013) which tested the indirect relationship between workplace bullying and health symptoms through coping strategies and resilience (Fraccaro, 2014; Maidaniuc-Chirilă, 2015a/2015b/2015c; Naranayan & Betts, 2014; Sauer, 2013), but so far there were few (Kivimaki et al., 2003) studies looking at the intermediate role of depressive symptoms in cases of exposure to workplace bullying. The present study revealed that not only resilience but also depressive symptoms mediate the relationship between exposure to workplace bullying and employees' strain, but their roles were totally opposite. While resilience mediates the relationship in that it reduces the levels of mental and physical strain experienced by exposed employees, depressive symptoms increased the levels of strain experienced by employees when exposed to acts of workplace bullying. According to these results, resilience can act like a protective factor, while depressive symptoms act like a risk factor.

These results have practical implications in that they bring new information about the implications of pre-existing levels of depressive symptoms in employees and about the benefits of high levels of personal resilience in the case of experiencing workplace adversity, in general, and in case of experiencing workplace

bullying, in particular.

These results can help occupational psychologists and human resources practitioners to develop more fruitful training programmes in their organizations. These training programmes would not only help individuals become more resilient but also help the organization become more resilient.

Study Limitations

The present study has a series of limitations. The first limit refers to the fact that data are collected with the aid of self-report questionnaires, which trigger some subjective responses that may not reflect real levels of victimization through workplace bullying or higher levels in personal resilience estimations. Further research should employ more objective instruments in order to measure exposure to workplace bullying and resilience levels.

A second limit stands in the fact that the present study reveals results based on cross-sectional data. Further research in the field should test this mediation model using longitudinal data. The relationships between the variables are more accurate if they are studied at two different times. Moreover, the workplace bullying phenomenon is better measured in a longitudinal way than in a cross-sectional manner.

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