

Workplace Bullying and Victimization: A Mixed Method Approach

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Abstract: *Purpose:* The main scope of the survey was to examine how school bullying and victimization experiences affect workplace bullying and victimization, as also the role of the personality traits and workplace environment to this relation. It also aimed to investigate the consequences on mental health of employees who are targets of workplace victimization, as well as the reaction mechanisms of employees against bullying.

Method: 302 employees from four private companies in Cyprus completed the Organizational Culture Assessment Instrument, Five Factor Personality Inventory Questionnaire, Retrospective Bullying Questionnaire, Post-traumatic Embitterment Disorder Self-Rating, Negative Acts Questionnaire – Revised, and a list of coping skills, in one-time phase.

Results: Based on the results, school victimization experiences and neuroticism, influenced the occurrence of workplace victimization, as also workplace climate affected the above relationship. Workplace climate, workplace victimization and neuroticism, found to be related with the development of Post-Traumatic Embitterment Disorder. In addition, neuroticism and workplace victimization mediated by employees' coping skills.

Keywords: School bullying, workplace bullying, victimization, work environment, personality traits, coping skills.

INTRODUCTION

Workplace Bullying: Definition

A significant number of researchers in the field of psychology, sociology and criminology attempt to describe the phenomenon of workplace bullying. While the definitions given vary, certain key features define the phenomenon, as a process by which an individual or group of individuals treats another individual or group of individuals unfairly in the workplace, with the purpose of causing physical or psychological harm. These behaviors persist over time, and the person who is the target finds it difficult to defend himself/herself (Ciby & Raya, 2015; D'Cruz *et al.*, 2018; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018). Moreover, the power difference between the perpetrator and the target, is another feature used to describe workplace bullying.

The prevalence of workplace bullying varies across countries, due to the influence of national culture and the different measure used in the studies. According to Tintori *et al.*, (2021), 19.8% of boys and girls between 11 and 19 years old have been victims of aggressive behaviours. Using the Negative Acts Questionnaire (NAQ) in a sample of nurses in Portugal, 13% were exposed to bullying behaviours weekly over a period of six months (Sá & Fleming, 2008), as 7.3% of the responders self-labelled themselves as targets of bullying among junior and middle managers in Greece (Galanaki & Papalexandris, 2013), by completing the same questionnaire. Also, while many studies report no gender differences at all (Giorgi *et al.*, 2016; Tsuno *et*

al., 2015), other findings identify higher rates of victimization in women than in men (Salin, 2018; Zapf *et al.*, 2020).

Factors Associated with Workplace Bullying and Victimization

Attempting to understand the phenomenon of workplace bullying, the role of environmental influence cannot be ignored. Previous studies have shown that, the organizational cultures which are characterized by lower autonomy and feedback, high workload, job insecurity, authoritarian management style, unspecified employee's role and duties, poor relations between employees and competition, were the most predominant components that create a "fertile" environment for the development of workplace bullying. Moreover, when the above mentioned factors occurred for a prolonged period of time, may perpetuate the phenomenon of workplace bullying (D'Cruz *et al.*, 2021; D'Cruz *et al.*, 2014; Goodboy *et al.*, 2017; Parent-Thirion *et al.*, 2016; Pheko *et al.*, 2017; Salin, 2015).

At the same time, and taking into account surveys that investigate workplace bullying in relation to the personality characteristics of individuals, they support the higher rates of the phenomenon in people who, in an assessment, higher response to questions related to neuroticism, and lower to extraversion, agreeableness and conscientiousness (Nielsen *et al.*, 2017; Nielsen *et al.*, 2012). In addition, other studies indicate that lower level of agreeableness and conscientiousness and higher levels of neuroticism and extraversion were associated with both bullying and victimization. Nevertheless, the trait of openness to experience, was

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found not to be related to either bullying or victimization (Mitsopoulou & Giovazolita 2015).

Workplace Bullying and Post-Traumatic Embitterment Disorder

Post-traumatic Embitterment Disorder (PTED), is a relatively new term in the literature, which attempts to describe the negative emotional impact that employees experience, due to the chronic bullying they experience in the context of their work (Linden, 2003). Feeling bitter, represents the emotional consequence of a social rejection that is perceived as unjust, and the state in which the person is no longer hopeful for change and has also lost the control of a situation (Linden & Maercker, 2011).

Karatuna and Gok (2014), focused on the relation between PTED and workplace victimization, had identified the connection of these elements, while Michailidis and Cropley (2016), argues that there is a positive relation among bitterness and excessive control expressed by the boss over his employees, and a negative correlation between the bitterness and the feeling of low work commitment by employees.

The Link between School Bullying and Victimization and Workplace Bullying and Victimization

In both school and work contexts, victimization describes the process in which an individual is exposed to mistreatment by another individual or group of individuals, where environmental and individual factors, interact in the development and prevalence of the phenomenon (Rai & Agarwal, 2019; Volk *et al.*, 2021). Specifically, and based on recent findings, competition among colleagues, poor social relations in the context of work, ineffective anti-bullying policy, pressure and intense workload, unfair behavior by the authorities, low self-esteem, neuroticism, may favor the development of workplace bullying (Djurkovic *et al.*, 2021; Xu *et al.*, 2020). Although, so far, few studies have investigated the mechanisms through which school victimization is linked to workplace victimization, and intrapersonal factors that may be related to this relationship, such as victim's coping strategies for dealing with victimization.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

302 employees of four private companies in Cyprus, aged 18 and above, who have been employed by the

company in which they work for at least 3 months, were asked to complete the following questionnaires online. Their participation was voluntary and special attention was paid to ensuring their anonymity and personal data.

Hypothesis

H1: Employees who have been victimized during their school years would have an increased chance of facing similar experiences in their workplace.

H2: Neuroticism, extroversion, and conscientiousness, would be positively related with workplace victimization. The study also aimed to investigate the role of coping skills in the above relation.

H3: Negative workplace climate, characterized by poor peer relationships, poor working conditions, high work pressure, role ambiguity, chaotic environment, would mediate in the above relationship, enhancing the relationship between personality traits and workplace victimization.

H4: The negative workplace climate, would be positively related with workplace bullying and to PTED symptomatology of employees.

H5: Employees who experienced workplace victimization would be more likely to develop PTED symptoms than non-victimized employees.

H6: The study also aimed to investigate whether school bullying, coping skills, personality traits, gender, and age, relate with workplace victimization and PTED.

Questionnaires

The 24 items Organizational Culture Assessment Instrument (Cameron & Quinn's, 2011) was used to assess the workplace climate. It includes four factors of the work climate (work culture, work environment, organizational characteristics, and hierarchy at work), with a good level internal validity ($\alpha > .80$). Pressure Management Questionnaire Indicator (Williams & Cooper, 1998), which includes 29 questions was given to participants, in order to assess peer relationships, company climate, employees' feelings at work, company atmosphere, satisfaction and commitment to the company. The internal validity ranging between acceptable and good levels ($\alpha = .78 - .89$). The answers were given on a Likert scale in both questionnaires.

Personal characteristics assessed by the Five Factor Personality Inventory Questionnaire (Goldberg *et al.*, 2006). The questionnaire includes 50 questions which emerge 5 factors that describe the participants' personality (socialization, receptivity, conscientiousness, neuroticism, intimacy / cooperation), and the answers were given on a Likert scale. The internal validity index ranges from acceptable to good levels for all factors ($\alpha = .78 - .88$).

Retrospective Bullying Questionnaire was used for the assessment of past experiences of school bullying and victimization through retrospective evaluation (Rivers, 2001), with good level internal validity ($\alpha > .86$). The tool starts by defining school bullying and victimization and participants completed 44 questions through a 5-point Likert scale, to estimate the frequency, severity and duration of 6 types of school bullying and victimization, as well as the time phase in which individuals encountered these experiences (elementary, high school, university). The Questionnaire also included open-ended questions, which encouraged participants to report their experiences in more detail.

Post-traumatic Embitterment Disorder Self-Rating scale was used to measure employees' bitterness (Linden's *et al.*, 2009). Participants were required to answer 19 questions using a Likert scale. The internal validity of the questionnaire varies at excellent levels ($\alpha = .93$).

By completing the Negative Acts Questionnaire – Revised, participants first read essential information that describes the terms "Work Bullying" and "Work Victimization" (Einarsen *et al.*, 2009), and were asked to assess the existing bullying and victimization experiences in the workplace, by answering 22 questions using a 5-point Likert scale. The internal validity of the questionnaire ranges from very good to excellent levels ($\alpha = .87 - .93$). Moreover, participants who experienced workplace bullying were asked to choose the main ways through which they tried to deal with work-related bullying, by choosing one or more methods from a list of 10 coping skills, as well as assess the degree of their effectiveness on a 7-point Likert scale (coping skills) (Smith *et al.*, 2003).

Analysis Plan

IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25.0 and PROCESS (Hayes, 2021) was used, where stepwise multiple regression, linear

regression, moderation and mediation analysis were applied to test the hypotheses of the study. Mediation analysis has also been used to investigate the mediated role of workplace environment between the relation of personality traits and workplace victimization with PTED.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

84 men (25.4% of the sample) and 218 women (65.9%) took part in the survey (total number of participants = 302). The age of the participants ranged as follows: 20.2%=18-30 years, 30.2%=31-40 years, 28.1%=41-50 years, 12.7%=55 years old and over. 13.9% of the participants have a high school diploma, 27.2% of them have a bachelor's degree, 42% of them have a master's degree, and the remaining 8.2%, a PhD degree. 11.5% of the participants have been employed in the company from three months to one year, 15.7% for 1-3 years, 18.4% for 3-6 years, and 44.7% for 6+ years.

Results

In order to evaluate the predictive relations between variables, a stepwise multiple regression was conducted. When neuroticism and school victimization set as predictors, and workplace victimization as dependent variable, results indicated that 20% of the variance of workplace victimization can be explained from the above predictors, with neuroticism being the strongest predictor ($R^2=.204$, $F = (1.299) = 27.5$, $p < .001$) (see Table 1). With neuroticism, workplace climate and workplace victimization as predictors, and PTED as dependent variable, results showed that 43% of the variance of PTED can be explained from the prediction of the above variables, with workplace victimization being the strongest predictor ($R^2=.431$, $F = (1.298) = 5.54$, $p < .001$) (see Table 2). For the examination of the effect of school victimization, personality traits and workplace climate on workplace victimization, linear regression was used. Results indicated that, school victimization has a significant impact on workplace victimization, explaining the 11.9% of its variance scores ($R^2=.119$, $F = (3.882) = 40.3$, $p < .001$), ($\beta = .34$, $p < .001$). Testing the effect of personality traits on workplace victimization, results showed that only neuroticism has a statistically significant effect on workplace victimization ($R^2=.131$, $F = (5.269) = 45.02$, $p < .001$), ($\beta = .36$, $p < .001$). No statistically significant effect of extraversion on workplace victimization was

Table 1: Summary of Stepwise Multiple Regression Analysis for Neuroticism and School Victimization Predicting Workplace Victimization (N=302)

Variable	Workplace Victimization				
	B	SEB	B	R ²	F
Neuroticism	.78	.14	.30**	.13	45.0
School Victimization	.98	.19	.28**	.20	27.5

**p<.001.

Table 2: Summary of Stepwise Multiple Regression Analysis for Workplace Victimization, Neuroticism and Workplace Climate Predicting PTED (N=302)

Variable	PTED				
	B	SEB	β	R ²	F
Work Victimization	.60	.07	.42**	.35	160.8
Neuroticism	1.05	.17	.28**	.42	40.5
Work Climate	-.25	.11	-.12**	.43	5.5

**p<.001.

found ($R^2=.004$, $F= (4.512) =1.15$, $p>.05$), nor of conscientiousness on workplace victimization ($R^2=.01$, $F= (3.024) =3.18$, $p>.05$). Additionally, workplace climate has a statistically significant effect on workplace victimization ($R^2=.278$, $F= (9.454) =115.26$, $p<.001$), ($\beta=0.53$, $p<0.001$) (see Table 3). Results also revealed a statistically significant low correlation between negative workplace climate and PTED ($r=-.431$, $p<0.01$), and a statistically significant effect on PTED ($R^2=.186$, $F= (9.454) =68.3$, $p<.001$), ($\beta=0.43$, $p<.001$). Furthermore, workplace victimization was found to have a statistically significant effect on PTED ($R^2=.35$, $F= (13.742) =160.8$, $p<.001$), ($\beta= 0.59$, $p<0.001$). Findings also indicated that only neuroticism is a statistically significant predictor on PTED ($R^2=.223$, $F=(5.269)=86.19$, $p<.001$, $\beta=.472$, $p<0.01$), no statistically significant effect was found of extraversion on PTED ($R^2=.01$, $F=(4.512)=.14$, $p>.05$), as also no statistically significant effect of conscientiousness on PTED ($R^2=.05$, $F=(3.024)=15.76$, $p>.05$) (see Table 4). Mediation analysis results showed that neuroticism is a significant predictor of workplace climate ($B=-.54$, $SE=0.10$, 95% CI $[-.74, -.35]$, $\beta=-.30$, $p<0.001$), as also workplace climate is a significant predictor of workplace victimization ($B=-.67$, $SE=0.72$, 95% CI $[-.81, -.53]$, $\beta=-.47$, $p<0.001$). According to neuroticism, it was found to be a significant predictor of workplace victimization ($B=.58$, $SE=0.13$, 95% CI $[.32, .84]$, $\beta=-.22$, $p<0.001$), with a statistically significant indirect coefficient, $B=.36$, $SE=0.10$, 95% CI $[.19, .56]$. Testing for moderation effects of neuroticism on workplace victimization, moderated by age, gender, years of experience or

educational level, results did not prove any statistically significant effect. Examining the moderated role of coping skills to workplace victimization experiences, and by dividing them in three subgroups (avoidance, fight back and asking for help), it was found that both fight back reactions and asking for help ($R^2=.206$, $F=(15.657)=11.435$, $p<.001$), as well as avoidance ($R^2=.081$, $F=(10.897)=7.949$, $p<.001$), were statistically significant moderators of neuroticism on workplace victimization.

DISCUSSION

Workplace Bullying and Victimization, and the Role of Personality

The current study aimed to identify the association between personality traits and workplace bullying and victimization, relying on the existing literature which supports that both negative affectivity and neuroticism are connected to workplace victimization (Nielsen & Knardahl, 2015, Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018). The results of the study, are in line with earlier surveys, showing that neuroticism is related with workplace victimization. Neuroticism is defined as an individual's tendency to experience negative affectivity and psychological distress. It is closely related to anxiety, pessimistic perspective, depression, self-consciousness, impulsiveness, irrational thoughts, as well as weakened coping skills. Those characteristics of an employee's personality may be understood by others as provocative, disturbing, and "encourage" in creating a

Table 3: Summary of Linear Regression Analysis for School Victimization, Workplace Climate and Neuroticism, Predicting Workplace Victimization (N=302)

Predictive Variable	Workplace Victimization				
	B	SEB	β	R ²	F
School Victimization	1.22	.19	.34**	.12	40.3
Neuroticism	.94	.14	.36**	.13	45.0
Workplace Climate	.76	.07	.53**	.28	115.2

**p<.001.

Table 4: Summary of Linear Regression Analysis for Workplace Victimization, Workplace Climate and Neuroticism to PTED (N=302)

Predictive Variable	PTED Victimization				
	B	SEB	β	R ²	F
Workplace Climate	-.88	.11	-.43**	.18	68.3
Neuroticism	1.74	.19	.47**	.22	86.1
Workplace Victimization	.83	.07	.59**	.35	160.8

**p<.001.

victimization ground against him. At the same time, an employee scoring high on neuroticism, may evaluate and give meaning to the behaviours of his colleagues towards him, in a way that he perceives them as “bullying” more often than “neuroticism lower” employees (Nielsen & Knardahl, 2015). On the other hand, employees who have been targets of bullying behaviours over time can become more nervous, tense and have a range of emotional reactions (Finne *et al.*, 2011; Hógh *et al.*, 2019), something that is described as a reverse causality mechanism. Thus, taking into account the above, neuroticism, can be understood as a vulnerability factor among potential targets, increasing the risk of exposure to bullying (D’Cruz *et al.*, 2021; Nielsen *et al.*, 2017; Podsiadly & Gamian-Wilk, 2017; Reknes *et al.*, 2019).

Extraversion, as one of the five personality traits of the Big Five personality theory, represents individuals who are social, thrive on excitement, enthusiastic and action-oriented. On the other side, introverts, have less exuberance and energy, are less involved in social activities, and tend to avoid social interactions (Rai & Agarwal, 2019). As Dewi *et al.*, (2022) support, extraverts, are more capable of managing their negative emotions, and the anxiety that a social disagreement may cause them, in such a way as to be protected from both bullying and its negative consequences (Bashir & Hanif, 2022; Bowling *et al.* 2010). Instead, other studies found no difference in

extraversion–introversion between targets and non-targets (Nielsen *et al.*, 2017). According to the results of the current study, extroversion is not statistically significant related to workplace bullying and victimization, showing that either more or less extroverted people can equally experience work bullying.

Regarding to conscientiousness, and according to Watson and Hubbard (1996), this personality trait is associated with effective coping strategies, as individuals high in conscientiousness are more likely to persevere under duress, are less likely to allow a stressful environment to influence work outcomes (Bowling & Eschleman, 2010), and are more likely to respond to stress in productive ways (Bowling & Eschleman, 2010; Yang & Diefendorff, 2009). In contrast, other surveys represent conscientiousness as a risk factor of workplace bullying (Rudert *et al.*, 2020). However, the results of this study do not indicate any statistically significant relationship between conscientiousness, workplace bullying, victimization, and coping skills. This leads to surface the need for furthermore detailed study of the above factors, under a longitudinal investigation.

Workplace Bullying and Victimization, and the Role of Workplace Environment

In agreement with the existing literature, the research results reveal that negative workplace

environment, described by negative atmospheric conditions, poor equipment, tools and technology, poor co-worker relationships and high work stress affect employees' mental health (Anjum *et al.*, 2018). In addition, studies investigating workplace bullying and victimization, found that workplace environment stressors, relate to bullying and victimization at work (Chenevert *et al.*, 2022).

Especially in cases where a work environment is characterized by the above elements, the effect of neuroticism to workplace victimization is strengthened (Halim *et al.*, 2018). Under negative and distressing working conditions, highly neurotic employees may engage in annoying behaviours more often, which could lead potential perpetrators to bully them, and treat them unjustly. In particular, in organizations where employees are dissatisfied with the work environment, are more likely to be involved in interpersonal conflicts which may then escalate into bullying and victimization, especially for those with more "vulnerable" characteristics, such as neuroticism (Balducci *et al.*, 2011, Chenevert *et al.*, 2022).

On the other hand, a positive workplace climate, which promotes collaboration between colleagues, with a community-centered approach in which the employee and employer have an empathetic relationship, and which takes into account the rights and needs of workers, is found to be a protective factor of workplace bullying and negative emotions to targets, while also enhancing physical and psychological well-being of an employee (D'Cruz *et al.*, 2021; Samsudin *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, in cases of workplace victimization, workers who were victims, and yet felt that they were in a work environment with positive characteristics that provided them with the feeling of safety and trust, appeared to have a milder negative impact on their psycho-emotional state (Feijo *et al.*, 2019). In agreement with the above, and based on the results of the current research, the mediating role of the workplace environment between the relationship of neuroticism and workplace victimization is identified. Thus, employees higher on neuroticism, working in an unhealthy work environment, have a higher chance of workplace victimization.

The Link between School Bullying and Victimization, and Workplace Bullying and Victimization

Looking for the factors that are associated with the development of workplace bullying, we could not

overlook past employee victimization experiences. At the end of the first and during the second decade of this century, studies combined the insights from school victimization with other theories seeking answers to questions concerning the role of past victimization experiences to current victimization experiences. The current study has a retrospective method, aiming to ascertain whether past bullying experiences tend to persist over time, expecting that people who have experienced school bullying are more vulnerable to workplace bullying.

Taking into account the consequences of experiences of school victimization in later life (Andreou *et al.*, 2021; Lee, 2021), the current study aimed to investigate the relationship between past school bullying and current workplace bullying, under a retrospective methodology. Results indicated a significant relationship between school victimization and recent experience of workplace victimization, something that brings to the surface the continuation of the phenomenon, in which victimization by peers at school may put individuals at risk of continued victimization at work in their adulthood.

The transition between school bullying and victimization in a workplace context, reveals the need to develop and implement actions that will aim both at preventing and dealing with this phenomenon. Specifically, the early detection of school bullying, the strengthening of students through the development of legitimate behaviors when managing their disputes, the development of self-protection skills, the promotion of respect both among students and employees, the empowerment of cooperation, teamwork and effective communication skills, as well as the establishment of a clear anti-bullying policy in the school and work context, can be useful practices in dealing with the phenomenon (Brendgen & Poulin, 2018; Sidiropoulou *et al.*, 2020).

Workplace Victimization and PTED

Experiencing workplace bullying, has been linked with several negative consequences on a physical (e.g., insomnia, musculoskeletal pain), social (e.g., isolation) and mental level (e.g. anxiety, melancholy, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder) (D'Cruz *et al.*, 2021; Hansen *et al.*, 2018; Hogh *et al.*, 2019; Xu *et al.*, 2018). While recent research supports that victims of workplace bullying can exhibit post-traumatic stress symptomatology, they do not necessarily meet the criteria for a diagnosis of this disorder (D'Cruz *et al.*,

2021). However, another group of researchers argues that PTED can more accurately describe the symptoms a victim of workplace bullying experiences, as PTED, has later on been discussed and suggested as an appropriate diagnostic term for victims of workplace bullying (Linden & Arnold, 2021; La Torre *et al.*, 2022). In line with the results of the current survey, and as other studies on this topic also support (Karatuna & Gök, 2014), workplace victimization is positively connected with reporting embitterment reactions, something that brings us closer to the consideration of PTED as an appropriate diagnostic term for victims of workplace bullying.

In addition, according to research findings, employees who have been targets of workplace bullying, who report higher levels of neuroticism, are more "vulnerable" to the development of PTED symptomatology, which can be understood considering the characteristics of neuroticism in both cognitive and psycho-emotional level. Specifically, individuals with higher levels of neuroticism tend to have lower threshold to experiencing negative affect, have difficulty choosing appropriate methods of managing a conflict, are experiencing more negative emotions due to their difficulty of emotion regulation, and cling to a perpetual cycle of negative evaluation of situations (Barlow *et al.*, 2021; Linden *et al.*, 2009; Linden & Maercker, 2011; Tonarely *et al.*, 2020).

LIMITATIONS

In the current study, a sample of employees from four private companies was used. Thus, a limitation of this study is the lack of generalizability of the data in other sectors. Also, as it has been previously mentioned, the findings of this study were based on a cross-sectional method design. Therefore, the connections between variables and causal conclusions can be determined through a longitudinal study.

CONTRIBUTIONS AND FUTURE STUDY

The present study aimed to investigate the factors that relate with the occurrence of workplace bullying with a history of workplace victimization, as well as its consequences to victims. Results showed that neuroticism and workplace environment contribute to the development of workplace victimization, and that these experiences negatively affect people's mental health and functionality.

Considering the results of the research, we can conclude the need to develop and implement

prevention and intervention programs in both school and workplace bullying. In particular, it is deemed necessary to strengthen the employees' conflict management skills, as well as cooperation and good communication skills. Also, the existence of a clear political framework around school and workplace bullying is considered necessary. Finally, the role of colleagues as well as the management team in a work context is of the utmost importance in supporting victims in cases of workplace bullying and victimization.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

With this form I confirm that:

- All authors have participated in (a) conception and design, or analysis and interpretation of the data; (b) drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content; and (c) approval of the final version.
- This manuscript has not been submitted to, nor is under review at, another journal or other publishing venue.
- The authors have no affiliation with any organization with a direct or indirect financial interest in the subject matter discussed in the manuscript

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