

Bullying in the Workplace: Background and a Call to Action

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Introduction

This information is offered as useful background for ongoing considerations of workplace bullying and harassment that is not based on a protected class such as race, religion, disability, sex, etc., but rather consists of behavior that has no legitimate purpose, ought to be known to be unwelcome and creates a hostile, intimidating or toxic environment (University of New Brunswick, n.d.) through actions like microaggressions, repetitive slights, minimizing or degrading comments, or exclusionary behaviors often considered to be forms of incivility. Such behaviors are known to result in adverse health effects, contributing to illness, exacerbation of stress-related conditions, and can result in absence from work or sick leave (Bartlett & Bartlett, 2011; Kivimaki et al., 2000).

As such, bullying and harassment pose a health hazard in the workplace. This backgrounder is intended to highlight those impacts and offer suggestions for consideration of a systemic approach to the issue. This document is not anticipated to formulate a policy, statement or position; it should only inform thinking and discussion about how our community wants to work together and address behaviors that detract from our wellbeing, health, and success. This backgrounder will highlight how workplace bullying is defined, convey examples of workplace bullying, its toxic health effects, and some recommendations for how to best address the issue.

Background

There has been increasing attention to bullying and incivility in the workplace in the United States. Much of the research originated in other countries around the globe including Canada (Lee & Brotheridge, 2006), the UK (Harthill, 2008), Australia (Birks et al., 2017), the EU (Xu et al., 2019), and Asia (Kwan et al., 2020; Tsuno et al., 2018). Politicians and institutional leaders have focused on discriminatory harassment, and even then, only when it is a case involving a “protected class” under Titles VII and IX. While this focus is certainly warranted, a policy is also needed which is broader and protects every employee from workplace bullying, regardless of personal characteristics or membership in a designated group or protected identity. Research supports the argument that there is a need for this kind of policy at businesses and universities across the country (Yamada, 2010). Branch and Murray (2015) estimate ≈27% of the U.S. workforce has been (20%), or are being (7%), subjected to workplace bullying, while 21% of workers have witnessed this kind of behavior.

Definitions of Workplace Bullying

Bullying is generally thought to be a pattern of persistent, unwelcome, repetitive behavior - known to be unwelcome that creates a hostile, intimidating or toxic environment - targeted at an individual or group of individuals (Harthill, 2008). Often, there is a power imbalance involved, which is exploited to the detriment of the targeted party. If it is based on a protected class, e.g. based on religion, race, nationality, gender, etc., then it is considered discriminatory. If it is not based on a protected class, it is nonetheless unacceptable.

Incivility, by contrast, is conduct that is not typically persistent or targeted toward an individual or group, but may be frequent, generalized rude behavior exercised toward

any/everyone, without any pattern (Bartlett & Bartlett, 2011). It does not typically convey a threat to the other party/parties present, but is generally outside the bounds of respectful, equitable, dignified communication.

Bullying is a form of harassment, whether or not there is a protected class or discriminatory element involved. For a clear distinction between these types of harassment, see University of British Columbia's site "Defining Bullying and Harassment" (<https://bullyingandharassment.ubc.ca>). There are many definitions of workplace bullying articulated in literature. Some definitions of workplace bullying include:

- "Workplace bullying refers to intensive and repeated abuse in the workplace, up to and including aggression or violence" (Jung & Yoon, 2018)
- "Workplace bullying constitutes repeated and persistent negative actions aimed at one or more individuals, which results in the creation of a hostile working environment" (Akella, 2016)
- "Workplace bullying comprises a range of behaviors that can be violent or non-violent, as well as direct/overt (e.g. humiliating someone in front of others) and indirect/covert behaviors (e.g. spreading malicious rumors about someone)" (Hoel et al., 1999; McCormack et al., 2018)

A few key words or themes that these definitions have in common: repeated, persistent, violent, and aggressive behavior of perpetrators toward targets of bullying.

Examples of Workplace Bullying

Bullying and "uncivil behavior" can take many forms and it's important to understand what behaviors cross the line. Bullying can begin as small, seemingly incidental behaviors, such as repeatedly being excluded from meetings, regular coffee or lunch events with co-workers, or being left out of group discussions and decisions. However, when these behaviors grow in frequency and impact, when they become a pattern of exclusion, they cross the line into constituting harassment. The following is a list of three different types of bullying behavior identified by Einarsen et al. (2009).

1. Work-related bullying
 - a. Someone withholding information which affects your performance
 - b. Being ordered to do work below your level of competence
 - c. Having your opinions ignored
 - d. Being given tasks with unreasonable deadlines
 - e. Excessive monitoring of your work
 - f. Pressure not to claim something to which by right you are entitled (e.g. sick leave, holiday entitlement, travel expense)
 - g. Being exposed to an unmanageable workload
2. Person-related bullying
 - a. Being humiliated or ridiculed in connection with your work
 - b. Having key areas of responsibility removed or replaced with more trivial or unpleasant tasks
 - c. Spreading of gossip and rumors about you

- d. Being ignored or excluded
 - e. Hints or signals from others that you should quit your job
 - f. Persistent criticism and repeated reminders of your errors or mistakes
 - g. Being ignored or facing a hostile reaction when you approach
 - h. Practical jokes carried out by people you don't get along with
 - i. Having allegations made against you
 - j. Being the subject of excessive teasing and sarcasm
3. Physically intimidating bullying
 - a. Intimidating behaviors such as finger-pointing, invasion of personal space, shoving, blocking your way
 - b. Threats of violence or physical abuse or actual abuse

Toxic Health Effects of Workplace Bullying

The health effects of bullying in the workplace can be profound, including but not limited to: stress, anxiety, poor concentration and lower productivity, reduced job satisfaction, panic attacks, PTSD, depression, elevated blood pressure or heart rate, headaches, and sleep disorders (Boulanger, 2013; Godin, 2004; Sansone & Sansone, 2015). Bullying can also create a toxic work environment that may negatively affect an entire office. Sometimes this is called “secondary bullying,” which can be just as harmful or more harmful for a bystander/observer of this behavior (Cooper, 2017). Branch and Murray (2015) also note that workplace bullying often involves some type of “power imbalance” which they define as, “one party is at a disadvantage or unable to protect or shield themselves from the bullying.”

OSHA and Workplace Bullying

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (1996) defines workplace violence as “violent acts, including physical assaults and threats of assault, directed toward persons at work or on duty.” The Occupational Safety and Health Administration defines workplace violence as “any act or threat of physical violence, harassment, intimidation, or other threatening disruptive behavior that occurs at the work site.”

While harassment is not covered explicitly in specific OSHA regulations as yet, OSHA's mission “to ensure safe and healthful working conditions for working men and women by setting and enforcing standards...” (Occupational Safety and Health Administration, n.d.) clearly supports safe environments that help prevent illness and reduce injury in the workplace. With the existing evidence of health impacts, one can see that workplace harassment and bullying are toxins and therefore, in principle, employers have a responsibility under OSHA to provide a harassment-free environment. So, if it isn't expressly covered under OSHA, it ought to be, and employers need to address it proactively as a health and safety issue. Currently, the toxicity and health effects of harassment and bullying have limited recourse through any defined, consistent process for those who are not part of a protected class.

Workplace Bullying in Academia

How then does this all connect to workplace bullying in academia? Like any other business or organization, academic institutions are not immune to a toxic work

environment (Cassell, 2011; Keashly & Neuman, 2010; Twale & Luca, 2008). A 2018 article in *The Guardian*, written by an “anonymous academic,” highlights the author’s experience of “repeated mistreatment” and “escalated incivility,” suggesting the “need (for a) bigger conversation about bullying in academia” (Anonymous, 2018). It is interesting to note that the author felt compelled to write anonymously, likely because the topic is perceived as so unsafe and risky to even discuss where one’s identity might be revealed, rendering one vulnerable to retaliation - itself a form of harassment. As was mentioned previously, workplace bullying often occurs because of a “power-imbalance” and that is the case in academia as well. As with this “anonymous academic,” who was of low seniority, their superiors were able to succeed at bullying them because of positions in power and higher seniority. The “anonymous academic” notes 10 incidents in which their department chair was “demeaning, intimidating, disrespectful, and disheartening.” Incidents included but were not limited to:

- undermining of authority in the classroom,
- taking away teaching assignments,
- sabotaging of a research grant

While this is just one person’s experience of workplace bullying at an academic institution, it is certain - based on observation, survey, and anecdotal information - that this is happening at colleges and universities internationally. It is also worth noting that while countries and academic institutions around the world (e.g. Canada, U.K.) have laws and policies against workplace bullying, it is up to the heads of academic institutions to enforce them. Currently in the United States, Oregon State University, Colorado State University, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison have policies against workplace bullying (Appendix A). Every Canadian university and college has an institutional anti-harassment policy and procedure (Appendix B).

[Workplace Bullying at Michigan State University](#)

Like all universities, MSU is not immune to workplace bullying. The ADAPP survey of faculty within the Colleges of Engineering, Natural Science, and Social Science done in 2009 and 2013 on the MSU Work Environment showed statistically significant increases in incivility. From a similar climate survey of MSU staff completed in early 2018, questions on uncivil behavior revealed some key findings:

- More than half of MSU staff reported experiencing and a little under half of MSU staff reported witnessing at least one of the listed uncivil behaviors.
- Among employee groups, APSA, Clerical Tech, Faculty and Academic Staff, and Service Maintenance Staff reported the highest percentage of uncivil behaviors.
- Across disciplines, non-STEM staff reported the highest percentage of uncivil behaviors.
- Overwhelmingly, those with a disability reported the highest percentage of uncivil behaviors. Also, a higher percentage of females and non-heterosexuals reported incidents of uncivil behavior in comparison to males and heterosexuals.
- Among racial identities, those who identified as Multiracial and Hispanic reported the highest percentage of uncivil behaviors.

Data from the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) for the first three quarters of 2018 indicated that 8% of all cases seen by EAP counselors since the beginning of the year had some level of concern about their work environment when they came to their first appointment with the EAP. Results of the 2019 “Know More” survey (Michigan State University, n.d.) also indicated that 70% of male faculty and 81% of female faculty reported experiencing incidents of incivility, while a similar number reported observing incidents directed at others. Examples of behaviors, provided in the survey, would constitute bullying under the definitions referenced herein, especially if repeated, pervasive, and targeted.

In addition to the survey results and EAP figures, other departmental offices frequently encounter evidence that bullying is prevalent at MSU. Most of the individual consultations with the WorkLife Executive Director concern experiences of workplace bullying and efforts to deal with difficult employees. Anecdotal evidence from the Faculty Grievance Officer indicates issues with power imbalances negatively affecting unit interactions.

Recommendations to Address Workplace Bullying

Like Titles VII and IX, which define and prohibit discrimination and sexual harassment at the federal and subsequently state and institutional levels, an institutional policy with a consistent definition and prohibition of harassment, and bullying as a form of harassment, is needed to protect employees who are not of a protected class but are nonetheless targets of harassment. Policies as position statements of the institution’s values and expectations, with comprehensive, well-understood and consistently implemented procedures provide both a platform for preventive education about bullying and harassment, as well as a mechanism for redress.

Some additional steps that could be implemented to prevent further workplace bullying from occurring include:

- “Dignity at work” policies that articulate expectations and definitions for common understanding and language
- Routine “stress audits”
- Workplace bullying prevention trainings and workshops
- Survey of workplace climate

Further recommendations are found in Appendix C.

Summary Statement

In our opinion, MSU needs an institution-wide approach to an institutional policy that sets out the statement in principle of prohibiting harassment, and bullying as a form of harassment, a clear conceptual and principle-based definition, and a step-by-step process for addressing concerns, filing complaints, levels of investigation, and a resource for complaint resolution and disposition with consequences. We can do this. It’s essential.

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Appendix A

University Definitions of Workplace Bullying in the United States

Oregon State University

“Bullying is defined as conduct of any sort directed at another that is severe, pervasive or persistent, and is of a nature that would cause a reasonable person in the victim's position substantial emotional distress and undermine his or her ability to work, study or participate in his or her regular life activities, and actually does cause the victim substantial emotional distress and undermines the victim's ability to work, study, or participate in the victim's regular life activities.”

Colorado State University

“Bullying in the context of the workplace is repeated mistreatment by words or actions that are intended to shame, embarrass, humiliate, degrade, demean, intimidate, and/or threaten an individual or group.”

University of Wisconsin-Madison

“Hostile and intimidating behavior is defined as unwelcome behavior pervasive or severe to the extent that it makes the conditions for work inhospitable and impairs another person’s ability to carry out his/her responsibilities to the university, and that does not further the University’s academic or operational interests. A person or a group can perpetrate this behavior. The person need not be more senior than or a supervisor to the target. Unacceptable behavior may include, but is not limited to:

- Abusive expression (including spoken, written, recorded, visual, digital, or nonverbal, etc.) directed at another person in the workplace, such as derogatory remarks or epithets that are outside the range of commonly accepted expressions of disagreement, disapproval, or critique in an academic culture and professional setting that respects free expression;
- Unwarranted physical contact or intimidating gestures; Conspicuous exclusion or isolation having the effect of harming another person’s reputation in the workplace and hindering another person’s work;
- Sabotage of another person’s work or impeding another person’s capacity for academic expression, be it oral, written, or other;
- Abuse of authority, such as using threats or retaliation in the exercise of authority, supervision, or guidance, or impeding another person from exercising shared governance rights, etc.

Repeated acts or a pattern of hostile and/or intimidating behaviors are of particular concern. A single act typically will not be sufficient to warrant discipline or dismissal, but an especially severe or egregious act may warrant either.”

Appendix B

University Definitions of Workplace Bullying in Canada

University of New Brunswick

“Harassment: behaviour which serves no legitimate purpose and which the instigator knows, or ought reasonably to know, has the effect of creating an intimidating, humiliating, hostile or offensive environment. Examples of behaviour which constitutes Harassment include but are not limited to: bullying, intimidation, coercion, physical assault, vexatious or malicious comment, or the abuse of power, authority or influence. Behaviour conducted in whole or in part through electronic means (such as e-mail, web postings, text messaging and other forms of electronic behaviour) shall be included within this definition. The reasonable exercise of administrative or academic authority does not of itself constitute Harassment.”

<http://www.unb.ca/humanrights/harassment.html> (See: “Policies and Clauses”)

University of British Columbia

“Bullying or harassment is objectionable and unwanted behaviour that is verbally or physically abusive, vexatious or hostile, that is without reasonable justification, and that creates a hostile or intimidating environment for working, learning or living.”

<https://bullyingandharassment.ubc.ca/>

McGill University

“Harassment means any vexatious behaviour by one Member of the University Community towards another Member of the University Community in the form of repeated hostile or unwanted conduct, verbal comments, actions or gestures, that affect the dignity or psychological or physical integrity of a Member of the University Community and that result in a harmful environment for such an individual. Within the employment relationship, a single serious incidence of such behaviour that has a lasting harmful effect on such an individual may also constitute Harassment.”

https://www.mcgill.ca/secretariat/files/secretariat/harassment-sexual-harassment-discrimination_policy-on.pdf

University of Alberta

Harassment - “Conduct or comment, either one-time or repeated that: a) is demeaning, intimidating, threatening, or abusive; and b) is not trivial or fleeting in nature; and c) causes offence and should have reasonably been expected to offend; and d) serves no legitimate purpose for the work, study or living environment, and e) undermines authority or respect in the work, study or living environment, or impairs work or learning performance, or limits opportunities for advancement or the pursuit of education or research, or creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive work or learning environment. Harassment includes bullying, which is a form of aggression that may include physical, verbal, or emotional abuse. Bullying poisons the work, study or living environment of the

person it targets. It can include persistent, offensive, abusive, intimidating or insulting behavior, abuse of power, and/or unfair sanctions which make the individual feel threatened, humiliated, and/or vulnerable. Sexual Harassment may be broadly defined as unwelcome conduct or comment of a sexual nature which detrimentally affects the work, study or living environment or otherwise leads to adverse consequences for the person who is the target of the harassment. It may consist of unwanted sexual attention, sexually oriented remarks or behaviours, or the creation of a negative psychological and emotional environment based on gender, gender identity or sexual orientation. It may be an isolated act or repetitive conduct, but cannot be trifling. A reprisal or threat of reprisal against an individual for rejecting a sexual solicitation or advance may also constitute sexual harassment. U of A Policies and Procedures On-Line (UAPPOL) The person(s) engaged in harassment need not have the intention to harass; it is the objective assessment of the circumstances that matters. How would a reasonable observer perceive the situation? A complainant need not expressly object to unwelcome conduct or comments, although any clear indication that the behaviour is unwanted will satisfy the test. A complainant's apparent passivity or failure to object overtly to sexual advances does not necessarily signal consent or welcomed behaviour, especially where a power imbalance exists between the individuals.”

<https://policiesonline.ualberta.ca/PoliciesProcedures/Policies/Discrimination-Harassment-and-Duty-to-Accommodate-Policy.pdf>

Appendix C

The following table is copied verbatim from Branch and Murray (2015) with colors added to enhance readability. We encourage you to view the primary source for more information.

Possible Interventions Based on Formal—Informal; Primary—Secondary—Tertiary Models.

	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary
Formal	Policies and Codes of Conduct	Contact support officers	Grievance policies and procedures
	Risk audit	Targets keep a diary	Conferencing or mediation processes
	Workplace bullying awareness workshops	Incident reports	Support for all parties
	Training for all staff on how to respond to bullying	Prompt investigation into incidents	Re-design aspects of the workplace
		Employee Assistance Program (EAP) - Counseling	
Informal	Developing respectful behaviors in the workplace	Social support for targets and witnesses	Conscious/unconscious reinforcement of respectful actions (e.g. don't engage in gossip)
	Modeling of respectful behavior by management	Bystanders stepping in	

SOURCE: (Branch & Murray, 2015)