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Understanding inappropriate behaviour: harassment, bullying and mobbing at work in Malaysia

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Abstract

Using a sample of Malaysia health care employees, this study shows that exposure to inappropriate behavior at work is considered to be high (42.6%). Questionnaires were obtained from 108 employees from various professions in clinical and non-clinical backgrounds at Kuala Lumpur Hospital, via stratified random sampling. The study shows that, within a sample of Malaysia health care employees, exposure to inappropriate behavior at work does not differ between grades and types of employment. The research also demonstrates that the factor structure of the Job Satisfaction Scale might not be appropriate in a Malaysian sample and an alternative factor structure is proposed.

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1. Introduction

Internationally, extensive research on harassment, bullying and mobbing (grouped under the term inappropriate behaviour) has been conducted over the last two decades, especially in Europe. Inappropriate behaviour is recognized worldwide as a serious problem in the work environment and has been shown to have severe consequences for both health (Bjorkqvist, Osterman & Lagerspetz, 1994) and job satisfaction of victims (Einarsen & Raknes, 1997). Until recently there was insufficient information in the literature about the phenomenon of

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inappropriate behaviour in Malaysia. Researchers have assumed that power distances, ethnicity, gender, organisation culture or possibly religion are significant factors in the development of inappropriate behaviour. Yet, there is no evidence to support these assertions. Therefore, the research was conducted to uncover explicit information about inappropriate behaviour in Malaysia and the potential factors associated with this phenomenon. It is particularly important to examine the concept of inappropriate behaviour in Malaysia, as research in the area has not taken cognisance of the multi-ethnic society and Asian culture that exists in this country. The population of Malaysia consists of many ethnic groups. The largest single group of Bumiputra (indigenous) is ethnic Malays who predominate in the states of Peninsular (West) Malaysia. Two states in East Malaysia (Borneo), which are Sabah and Sarawak comprise of certain non-Malay indigenous populates or natives who are also conferred with Bumiputra status. Other minorities who do not have Bumiputra status are mostly Chinese, Indian and other descent.

1.1. Definition

A definition and the use of terminology around inappropriate behaviour remain unclear. Zapf (1999) characterized mobbing as psychological aggression that often involves groups of mobbers rather than a single person whereas Fox and Stallworth (2009) pointed out that bullying is indefinable because a wide range of behaviours refer to the phenomenon and so it is too complicated to assign it one specific definition. For instance, it took approximately 15 years of concerted working effort between the United States Supreme Court and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to get clarity on the definition of sexual harassment (Fox & Stallworth, 2009). Crawshaw (2009) emotionally expressed her dissatisfaction on the subject of a definition of bullying. Her judgement was that definition and terminology conflict could delay the formation of bullying policies. Malaysia is one of the countries which does not have a comprehensive definition of inappropriate behaviour. To facilitate the researcher in this study the definitions from the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and Labour Relations Agency (2006) and Roderick Ramage (1996) were used and presented in table 1.

1.2. Method

A questionnaire with four sections was formed and piloted in Malaysia. The sections consist of questions regarding the exposure, support system and understanding which organisational atmosphere might lead to inappropriate behaviour using 36 questions (four items for each of the nine subscales uses a six point Likert scale) from Spector's (Spector, 1985; Spector, 2007) Job Satisfaction Scale (JSS). This well-established instrument by Spector has been translated into Malay language. A cross-sectional study conducted in Kuala Lumpur Hospital, was used to collect data from health care support employees via stratified random sampling. The participants were from various disciplines and characterise by the pertinent stratum which are clinical and non-clinical background. The questionnaires were distributed to 158 participants. A sample size calculation suggested that a sample of 104 was required. Therefore, a sample size of 158 was targeted to allow for a non-response rate of approximately one-third. The sample size calculation was based on a chi-square analysis, with an alpha value of 0.05, a minimum power of 90%, 2 degrees of freedom and a medium effect size. As there was no previous relevant research on which to base the likely effect size, the medium value was considered appropriate.

2. Result

Overall 108 questionnaires (68.4%) were obtained. To establish the frequency and the form of inappropriate behaviour, participants were provided with definitions of harassment, bullying and mobbing. Out of 108 taking part in the study, 46 (42.6%) reported they had been bullied, or harassed or mobbed several times. Harassment was the most frequent form with 27.8% (n=30), tailed by bullying 23.1% (n=25) and mobbing 14.8% (n=16) for single incidences. A small number of participants expressed having experienced more than one form of inappropriate behaviour. The participants were then asked, through an open-ended question, to elaborate on their own particular experience. The purpose of this segment was to confirm that the participants understood the definition, to observe the forms and typology of inappropriate behaviour among them. Participants were asked about their history of being a victim of inappropriate behaviour. The analyses specify that there is no statistically significant association found in

the sample between harassment and most of the demographic variables. Education, $\chi^2(1, N = 108) = 5.55, p = .02, \phi = .25$, and employment grade, $\chi^2(1, N = 108) = 4.60, p = .03, \phi = .23$, both show almost medium sized associations with bullying according to Cohen's (1988) criteria. Educational level may account for individuals gaining higher grade positions in work compared to other candidates. Mobbing also indicated a significant association with employment grade, $\chi^2(1, N = 108) = 3.680, p = .0559, \phi = .212$. Thus, from this analysis it appears that incidents of bullying and mobbing were related to an individual's position. Contrariwise, no significant relationship was revealed between employment grade and harassment, $\chi^2(1, N = 108) = 0.127, p = .721, \phi = -.056$. The term vertical inappropriate behaviour is applied when the recipients of abusive behaviours are supervisors and subordinates; subordinates intimidate their supervisor (bottom-up) and discrimination is directed down in supervisory positions (top-down). And, the lateral (or horizontal) form of abuse can be accredited when tormenting occurs between colleagues on the same position. Participants then were asked about the identity of the perpetrator from six possible categories of people: male supervisors, female supervisors, male colleagues, female colleagues, male subordinates and female subordinates. Participants were able to respond to more than one and they were also asked about the ethnicity of the perpetrator. The majority of perpetrators of bullying and mobbing were Malay. Most of the perpetrators were supervisors 21.3% (n=23) for bullying compared to 9.3% (n=10) for mobbing.

Table 1. Inappropriate behaviour definitions

Inappropriate behaviour	Definitions
Harassment	A person 'A' subjects another person 'B' to harassment on the grounds of sex/gender, religious belief, political opinion, disability, race, ethnic origin, age, sexual orientation, 'A' engages in unwanted conduct which has the purpose or effect of - Violating 'B's' dignity, or - Creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for 'B' (Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and Labour Relations Agency, 2006, p.8)
Mobbing	'Harmful treatment of or the putting of harmful treatment on an employee, often with the intention and effect of inducing him/her to leave.' (Ramage, 1996, p.1)
Bullying	'Persistent, offensive, abusive, intimidating, malicious or insulting behaviour, abuse of power or unfair penal sanctions, which makes the recipient feel upset, threatened, humiliated or vulnerable, which undermines their self-confidence and which may cause them to suffer stress.' (Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and Labour Relations Agency, 2006, p.8)

The bottom-up pattern for mobbing was 8.3% (n=9) incidents, while 7.3% (n=8) were for bullying. Co-workers with the same rank (the horizontal pattern) were perpetrators in 19.4% (n=21) of bullying cases and 12.0% (n=13) of mobbing cases. The survey also found that male perpetrators, including supervisors, colleagues and subordinates were most frequent for bullying 26.8% (n=29) compared with mobbing 12.0% (n=13). However, bullying incidents were more predominant among males in comparison to females' preference for mobbing behaviour.

Five Likert scale questions were used to explore the management support and action taken on employees when they came across the problem. The items have good internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients reported .84. Participants were asked to rate the organisation support (0 = none of the time to 4= All of the time). The following are the results of the analysis: N=108, M=10.96, SD=5.55. By looking at the mean, it appears that most participants were moderately satisfied with support provided by the organisation, as the total score for the five items has a potential range of 0 to 20. The victim and non-victim perceptions of support provided by the organisation were compared using a t-test. Significant differences were found in harassment, $t(106) = 5.16, p < .05$, and bullying, $t(106) = 5.12, p < .05$, with non-victim participants receiving higher scores than victims of harassment and bullying. The score for non-victims of harassment was M=12.50, SD=5.34 and for victims of harassment was M=6.97, SD=3.91. The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference= 5.53, 95% CI: 3.41 to 7.66) demonstrated a very large effect (eta squared = 0.20). Whereas, for bullying the score for non-victim was M=12.31,

SD=5.10 and for victim was M=6.48, SD=4.63. The magnitude of these differences in means (mean difference=5.83, 95% CI: 3.57 to 8.10) also presented an approximately large effect ($\eta^2 = 0.12$).

The participants reported an overall job satisfaction score of N=108, M = 157.71, SD = 27.31 for their work. The potential range of this scale is 36 to 216, where actual minimum and maximum values were 99 and 216, respectively. Out of 108 participants 32.4% (n=35) scored less than 144, suggesting that they consider feeling both unhappiness and uncertainty about their work environment. The remainder, 67.6% (n=73) appeared to be satisfied. JSS has an established factor structure but when Cronbach's alpha was calculated for the Malaysian sample, only four subscales (out of nine) attained an alpha value of at least 0.70. Because of this, a different structure for the scale was explored. The 36 items of the Spector's JSS were subjected to Principal Components Analysis (PCA). Prior to performing PCA, the suitability of data for factor analysis was assessed. Inspection of the correlation matrix revealed the presence of many coefficients of .3 and above. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value was .80, exceeding the recommended value of .60 (Kaiser, 1970; 1974) and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (Bartlett, 1954) reached statistical significance, supporting the factorability of the correlation matrix. The principal components analysis revealed the presence of ten components with eigenvalues exceeding 1. An inspection of the scree plot revealed a clear break after six components and another clear break after the first 3 components. Therefore, using Catell's (1966) scree test, a three factor or six factor solutions was suggested. The six component solution explained a total of 55.5% of the variance. To aid the interpretation of these six components, Oblimin rotation was performed. The rotated solution revealed the presence of simple structure (Thurstone, 1947), with the six components showing a number of strong loadings and all variables loading substantially on only two components. The three component solution explained a total of 41.8% of the variance with Factor 1 contributing 27.4%, Factor 2 contributing 7.5% and Factor 3 contributing 6.9%. Again, Oblimin rotation was performed. An examination of the pattern of factor loadings for the two solutions indicated that the three factor solution made more sense conceptually. Therefore, this solution was adopted. The three factors were labelled: Human Factors, Incentives and Organisational Centred. Human Factors refers to the general human common characteristic; supervision, communication, co-workers and nature of work. In contrast to Human Factors, the Incentives factor is about reinforcement for doing the job. Issues such as Salary, Benefit, Promotion and Reward dominated the scale. Only small correlations existed between Human Factors, Incentives, and Organisational Centred.

Cronbach's Alpha was executed again to support the reliability aspect of the new structure obtained in the principal components analysis result. The reliability coefficients for the proposed three factor structure of the JSS shows high reliability which is greater than .70. A t-test was employed to test the differences between victims and non-victims of inappropriate behaviour on the new factor structures which are, Human Factors, Incentives and Organisational Centred, for this study.

The significant differences were found in harassment, $t(106) = 3.61, p < .05$ and bullying, $t(106) = 5.58, p < .05$ for Human Factors, with non-victim participants getting greater scores than victims on harassment and bullying. The scores for non-victims of harassment were M=76.82, SD=11.23 and victims of harassment were M=67.00, SD=15.85. The magnitude of differences in the means for harassment, (mean difference=9.82, 95% CI: 4.43 to 15.21) had a large effect ($\eta^2 = 0.11$). For bullying the scores for non-victims (M=77.57, SD=11.26) and victims (M=62.56, SD=13.49) also illustrated a very large effect (mean difference= 15.01, 95% CI: 9.67 to 20.34, $\eta^2 = 0.23$).

3. Summary

The principal findings of this study exposed the form and frequency of harassment, bullying and mobbing within a Malaysian workplace environment. The exposure to inappropriate behaviour is all-embracing in this setting. One of the most crucial aspects of this analysis is that the relationship between inappropriate behaviour and demographics/work-related factors has only been partially revealed. Work grade had significant associations with bullying and mobbing. The direction of the findings demonstrates that bullying and mobbing occurred from the top-down and horizontally in similar amounts. People were more likely to report being affected by bullying compared to mobbing. Inappropriate behaviour was found to exist within a setting where those who had experienced this behaviour were also less satisfied with their interaction with co-workers. These demonstrate that non-existence of a

responsive environment was due to influence of Human Factors. Ethical approval: Queens University Belfast (PREC 35-2012) and Malaysia's National Medical Research Register (12-520-12142). Funding: This project was funded by Ministry of Health Malaysia. Conflict of interest: None declared.

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