

EXPLORING PERCEPTION OF BULLYING AT THE WORKPLACE: A CASE STUDY OF SOCSO SUNGEI PETANI, KEDAH

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ABSTRACT

Bullying is becoming increasingly common in our society today despite being a deviant behavior and also a criminal offense. This problem occurs among employees both in public and private sectors. This study as such aims to discuss the perception of workplace bullying among employees of Social Security Organization (PERKESO) located in Sungai Petani, Kedah. Low awareness among employees concerning bullying is yet to raise the alarm on the seriousness of the problem in our community. This quantitative study is conducted to explore the perception on bullying comprising 45 employees from the organization using a simple random sampling method. Research data was obtained through the distribution of a set of questionnaires. The instrument used in this study is the Revised Malaysian Bullying Questionnaire (R-MBQ). The perceptions of the employees are studied through various types of bullying behavior such as bullying in the form of personal attacks and contempt with several demographic variables. The results of the study reveals that there is no much differences in the perception on bullying among employees based on those demographic variables.

Keywords: *Bully, Crime, Deviant, Social Security Organization, Perception*

INTRODUCTION

Bullying encompasses a variety of negative and potentially harmful behaviors including actual and attempted harm to others including physical aggression, peer exclusion and verbal abuse (Smith et al., 2002). Bullying can also be understood as an aggressive behavior which may take various forms namely physical, verbal, sexual, stealing and the like, psychological and indirect (Ireland, 2005). Bullying is very likely to have an impact on physical and emotional injuries on the bullied person. Sekol (2013) looks at bullying in safe environments and situations, where bullying is recognized as part of assault, peer abuse and violence. For Ireland (2005), a single incident of assault can be considered oppression if the victim believes that he has been persecuted. An incident can also be considered as bullying when the power imbalance between the bully and the victim is implicit and

not immediately proven (Ireland, 2002). Based on the definitions given above, we can infer that bullying may include both direct and indirect forms of attack. Direct bullying occurs between the people involved, whereas indirect actions involve others, for example passing on insults or spreading rumours and indirect bullying mostly inflicts harm by damaging another's social reputation, peer relationships and self-esteem (Australian Education Authorities / The State of Queensland, 2022).

In Malaysia, even though workplace bullying has not reached an alarming level, one cannot deny that it continues to happen in organizations based on the reports that emerged from various government and private agencies' sources. Government agencies such as the Ministry of Human Resources play a vital role in recording and documenting the reports made by employers and employees regarding bullying or violence at the workplace. Cases of bullying in the workplace often receive less attention as more focus is given to bullying at schools in Malaysia. Although workplace bullying has not reached the same level of concern as school bullying, this matter cannot be taken lightly by the authorities. So far, there are only a handful of studies that have investigated the perception of bullying at workplace either in the public or private sectors. Workplace bullying should not be taken for granted as it is worse and more dangerous than sexual harassment at workplace (Rita, 2008). Many studies stated that life is more difficult for victims of bullying because they do not know what to do and there is no policy or law that can protect them compared to victims of sexual harassment. Most of them feel stressed, helpless and less committed to their work and prefer to quit. The government as such should look into this matter seriously and take initiatives to deal with the problem of workplace bullying.

The increase in research focusing on workplace bullying internationally to a certain extent reveals the fact that it is a serious problem in the work environment, revealing that bullying will have an impact on job satisfaction (Einarsen and Raknes, 1997). Among the impacts of bullying behavior in an organization include an increase in the number of employees who do not attend work, or who want to quit or leave the organization, in addition to an increase in the number of employee replacements (turnover) and the number of employees who quit early (Leymann, 1996 ; Rayner, 1997). According to Geffner et al., (2014), involvement in bullying incidents, especially for those who are bullied can increase the risk of abnormal behavior as well as an increase in chronic psychological health problems. This statement is supported by Blaauw et al., (2001) who agree that bullying can lead to suicidal behavior and even suicide.

The occurrence of bullying and being bullied in a safe environment such as school or workplace is a problem that is difficult to curb especially when it involves covert bullying. The bullying case of Sea Cadet of the National Defense University of Malaysia (UPNM), Zulfarhan Osman Zulkarnain in 2017 which involves overt bullying opened the eyes of Malaysians on the seriousness and the magnitude of bullying and this case caused anger, worry and anxiety among the community (Abas, 2021). Some previous studies such as Bender et al., (2010) and Sekol and Farrington (2010) stated that the incidence of bullying in safe environments is high and almost half of them have been involved in bullying or being bullied.

It is essential to study bullying in a safe environment considering that there is a hidden problem that leaves a deep and lasting impact on the victims of bullying. Although bullying behavior is a new phenomenon among civil servants in Malaysia and may not have reached an alarming level compared to other countries, it should be given serious attention because such issues can generally

create an unhealthy atmosphere at the workplace. This is also to ensure that employees can work in a safe environment without fear. The present study as such intends to uncover the phenomena of bullying among the employees of Social Security Organization (SOCSO) in Sungai Petani, Kedah. The main objective is to analyze the perceptions on bullying based on three demographic factors namely gender, age and work experience among those employees.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Kendrick (1997) stated that bullying behavior is an act by an individual or a group of individuals that causes misery to the victim by physical threatening such as attacking and verbal abuse or threats. This causes emotional disturbances on the victims of bullying for a prolonged period of time. Repeated acts of bullying especially direct bullying occur through violent acts between individuals. However, sometimes the act of bullying happens indirectly where the bully does not show signs of wanting to do the act of bullying because wise bullies hide their actions and even deny their actions against the victim (Azizan, 2004).

Individual differences are a general term used to refer to the study of ways in which individuals can differ from one another relatively. Psychologists have considered individual differences in a systematic manner which focuses on personality and psychopathology. Sociologists understand individual differences by referring to the dynamic interactions between systems or socialization experiences that contribute to individual inequality (Marsh and Keating, 2006). In other words, people with different biological, psychological and sociological characteristics, may think and act differently from one another. A person's behavior is formed through basic processes such as intellectual growth, for example assimilation, accommodation, and balance which are interrelated with the interaction between the individual and the environment. The perceived environment is a key feature for understanding environmental effects. Bronfenbrenner (1979) strongly emphasizes the role of perception by asserting that the environment is as it is perceived and not as it exists in objective reality. In this regard, individuals can change their behavior as a result of environmental demands and their perceptions based on experience in a particular setting.

The main idea of Strain Theory (Merton, 1938) in the context of this study is that frustration is an important factor in bullying or other misbehavior. The classical strain perspective predicts that the greater the gap between aspirations and expectations, the stronger the feeling of frustration or stress (Cohen, 1955). For Merton (1938), this socialized image of hope appears in the form of material wealth. Merton also adopted Durkheim's structural theory framework, to explain class differences in delinquent behavior. He argues that the inability to achieve money success creates a lot of frustration and, therefore, individuals may seek to achieve their financial goals through illegitimate channels. General strain theory focuses specifically on negative experiences, including negative relationships with others that negatively affect one's behavior. This tension may be caused by the failure to achieve certain goals, the delivery of harmful stimuli or the elimination of positive stimuli in one's life. Agnew (1992) claims that tension may be caused by the inability to use legal methods to escape from these three types of painful situations, which can be found in all social classes, that is social, economic spectrum as well as in everyday life.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this study, a quantitative survey is chosen. We chose quantitative research as the data collected can measure the perception of bullying among SOCSO Sungei Petani employees through questionnaire. SOCSO is an organization that comes under the purview of Ministry of Human Resources. Simple random sampling technique is used to collect data. This technique provides a non-zero and equal chance for all selected sample. The population of this study comprise the employees of the organization. The study population is 50 employees and the sample chosen for this study is 45 employees. The instrument used for data collection is the Revised Malaysian Bullying Questionnaire (R-MBQ). Part A of the instrument consists of several questions related to the respondent's demographics, namely gender, race, position level, age level and work experience. This demographic information will be categorized into groups to facilitate the analysis. Part B of the questionnaire consists of 20 items, collecting information about negative behavior in the workplace. Five categories of Likert scale (1,2,3,4 and 5) are used to represent 'Strongly Disagree', 'Disagree', 'Not Sure', 'Agree' and 'Strongly Agree'. These are used to measure the frequency of responses regarding negative behavior at work. In a survey study, data is obtained using a set of questionnaires and this involves numbers (closed questions) and words (open questions). The statistical tests used in this study include frequency analysis, descriptive analysis, independent samples T-Test and One-Way ANOVA.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses the research results. Three aspects related to bullying are covered namely (a) differences in workplace bullying behaviour based on gender ; (b) differences in workplace bullying behavior based on age ; and (c) differences in workplace bullying behavior based on work experience, which forms the foundation for the hypotheses tested in this study. These aspects are discussed in the section that follows.

(a) Differences in workplace bullying behavior based on gender

(i) Independent sample t-test on perception of bullying through personal attack

T-test is used to determine the gender difference in relation to the perception of workplace bullying through personal attack. For the perception of bullying through personal attacks, the result of the t-test value is $t = -1.508$, $p > 0.05$ ($p = 0.14$) reveals that there is no significant difference between the gender and the perception of the employees against bullying in the form of personal attacks. The mean for men is 1.62 while for women it is 1.86. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is no difference between male and female employee towards their perception regarding bullying in the form of personal attacks.

Table 1: Independent sample t-test on perception of bullying through personal attack

Gender	N	Mean	t	p
Male	17	1.62	-1.508	0.14
Female	28	1.86		
Total	45			

ii)

on perception of bullying with contempt**Independent sample t-test**

For the employee perception on bullying with contempt, the result of the t-test value is $t = 0.10$, $p > 0.05$ ($p = 0.92$) indicating that there is no significant difference between the employees gender and the perception of bullying with contempt. It was found that the mean for men was 1.85 while for women it was 1.88. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is no difference between male and female employees on the perception of occurrence of bullying with contempt.

Table 2 : Independent sample t-test on perception of bullying with contempt

Gender	N	Mean	t	p
Male	17	1.85	0.10	0.92
Female	28	1.88		
Total	45			

(b) Differences in workplace bullying behavior based on age**(i) One-way ANOVA Test on perception of bullying through personal attack**

For the perception of bullying related to personal attacks, the result of the One-Way ANOVA test, which is $F = 0.644$, $p > 0.05$ ($p = 0.53$) shows that there is no significant difference between the employees age level and the perception of bullying related to personal attacks. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is no difference between age and bullying related to personal attacks.

Table 3 : One-way ANOVA Test on perception of bullying through personal attack

Bullying Perception Based on Age Level	N	Mean	Standard deviation	F-Value	p
21 - 30	23	1.845	0.627	.644	.530
31- 40	15	1.644	0.436		
41- 50	7	1.786	0.405		
Total	45	1.770	0.510		

ii) One-way ANOVA Test on perception of bullying with contempt

For the perception of bullying with contempt, the results of the One-Way ANOVA test, which is $F = 2.420$, $p > 0.05$, ($p = 0.10$) shows that there is no significant difference between the employees age level and the perception of bullying related to contempt. Therefore, it can be inferred that there is no difference between age and perception on bullying with contempt. However, Ahlborg (2022) stated that bullying is not about disagreements, anger or conflict but it is about contempt where the perpetrator has intense feelings of dislike toward somebody or a group whom they consider to be worthless, inferior, or undeserving of respect.

Table 4: One-way ANOVA Test on perception of bullying with contempt

Bullying Perception Based on Age Level	N	Mean	Standard deviation	F-Value	p
21 - 30	23	1.913	0.821	2.420	.101
31- 40	15	1.600	0.507		
41- 50	7	2.286	0.567		
Total	45	1.867	0.718		

(c) Differences between workplace bullying behavior based on work experience

i) One-way ANOVA Test for Respondent's Work Experience and Perception on Bullying through Personal Attack

For the perception of bullying related to personal attacks, the result of the One-Way ANOVA test, which is $F = 0.947$, $p > 0.05$ ($p = 0.44$) indicate that there is no significant difference between the employees work experience and the perception of bullying related to personal attacks. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is no difference between work experience and bullying related to personal attacks.

Table 5 : One-way ANOVA Test for Respondent's Work Experience and Perception on Bullying through Personal Attack

Bullying Perception Based on Work Experience	N	Mean	SD	F-Value	p
Less than a year	6	2.111	0.612	.947	.447
2 years – 3 years	15	1.644	0.538		
4 years – 6 years	18	1.750	0.546		
7 years – 9 years	4	1.917	0.441		
More than 10 years	2	1.583	0.118		
Total	45	1.770	0.537		

ii) One-way ANOVA Test for Respondent's Work Experience and Perception on Bullying with Contempt

For the perception of bullying with contempt, the results of the One-Way ANOVA test, which is $F = 1.158$, $p > 0.05$ ($p = 0.34$) shows that there is no significant difference between employees work experience and the perception of bullying with contempt. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is no negative perception between work experience and bullying with contempt.

Table 6 : One-way ANOVA Test for Respondent's Work Experience and Perception on Bullying with Contempt

Bullying Perception Based on Work						
Experience	N	Mean	SD	F-Value	p	
Less than a year	6	2.083	0.665	1.158	.344	
2 years – 3 years	15	1.800	0.797			
4 years – 6 years	18	1.722	0.669			
7 years – 9 years	4	2.500	0.707			
More than 10 years	2	1.750	0.353			
Total	45	1.867	0.718			

DISCUSSION

This study explores the perception of bullying at workplace in Malaysia by taking SOCSO Sungei Petani as a case study. This study replicates the study conducted by Azizan (2004). It is evident that sometimes the act of bullying happens indirectly where the bully does not show signs of wanting to do the act of bullying because of the tendency for wise bullies to hide their actions and even deny their actions against the victim. This kind of bullying often happens indirectly at the workplace. It was found that the mean for perception of bullying against personal attack is higher for women compared to men. An incident can be considered as bullying when the power imbalance between the bully and the victim is implicit and not immediately proven as indicated by Ireland (2002). In addition, for bullying with contempt, it was found that female employees experience a higher percentage of this type of bullying compared to male. Overall, the analysis based on percentages show that women are more likely to be bullied at the workplace compared to men where the percentage of women experiencing bullying is 62.2% while for men it is only 37.8%.

Sekol (2013) focused on bullying in safe environments and situations, where the author recognized bullying as part of assault, peer abuse and violence. This study found that the age group between 21 to 30 shows the highest mean for personal attacks. Due to the pressure exerted by colleagues, an employee can have a lower performance at workplace causing them to be excluded from their group. A single incident of assault can be considered oppression if the victim believes that he or she has been persecuted (Ireland, 2005). The result also shows that employees aged between 21 to 30 recorded the highest bullying cases related to contempt. This shows that an employee can feel

the pressure from other colleagues to do work beyond their job scope or qualification and at the same time being ignored by the colleagues.

Bullying encompasses a negative and potentially harmful behaviors including actual and attempted harm to others, including peer exclusion and verbal abuse (Smith et al., 2002). Spreading gossip or accusations about a person entail bullying and at the same time opinions and views of that individual is not considered. Employees who have been working for less than a year experienced bullying in the form of personal attack at their workplace. In addition, employees who have been working less than a year too faced pressure from senior employees to perform work beyond their job scope or qualification and at the same time they may feel that they are ignored.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to shed light on the perception of bullying at the workplace. Based on the results of the study, every employee's opinion is important and it must be disclosed to all other employees at workplace because every individual has the right to work in safe conditions and environment. Some of the employees are in the opinion that bullying behavior need to involve physical contact as how it happens in school. This misconception must be changed so that all employees are fully aware that workplace bullying may happen in any workspaces. Apart from that, through this study, it is hoped that the knowledge on bullying at workplace can be enhanced and this will help the government to formulate effective policies to curb crime involving bullying at workplace. Future research on bullying may emphasize on the effectiveness of the implementation of laws related to bullying at workplace which can provide some basis to introduce new laws and policies to curb this problem. Future research may also look at general public's understanding and perception of bullying based on educational attainment in order to ascertain the role of education in raising awareness on this issue.

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