


Workplace Bullying and Organizational Deviance : Does Gratitude Matter?

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ABSTRACT

Two objectives guide this study: first, to examine whether organizational deviance is a consequence of workplace bullying, and second, to investigate a possible moderating effect of gratitude on the relationship between workplace bullying and organizational deviance. Variables were tapped using the Negative Acts Questionnaire, Organisational Deviance Measure, and Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ6). This study uses a correlation-causal design; data were drawn from a sample of 215 workers employed in telecom organizations and higher education institutes and universities based in Islamabad and Rawalpindi. Linear and hierarchical regression techniques were used to test the hypothesized direct and moderating effects. Results confirmed both hypotheses, implying that workplace bullying offsets organizational deviance in bullied employees and that gratitude moderates the relationship. Theoretically, the study contributes to the current literature by signifying that workplace bullying triggers deviance in employees and that gratitude is an important variable that lessens the undesirable triggering of workplace deviance in bullied employees. Managers should create awareness about bullying and deviant acts at work and assert gratitude within the organizational environment through training and workshops to lessen bullying incidents and offset unwanted bullying outcomes. They are also advised to minimize bullying and its subsequent effects by establishing clarity in work design.

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INTRODUCTION

Often paralleled with counterproductive work behaviour, organizational deviance, a well researched topic, is commonly deemed as being purposefully damaging for the organization as well as its stakeholders (Bolton et al., 2010; Douglas & Martinko, 2001; Fox & Spector, 2006; Hafidz & W, 2012; Levy & Tziner, 2011; Robinson & Bennett, 1995; Spector et al., 2006). Organizational deviance has two significant components: interpersonal deviance and organizational deviance (Bennett & Robinson, 2000). Interpersonal deviance pertains to harmful acts directed at others at work, such as acting rudely, deliberately humiliating or hurting, and playing pranks on others at work. Organizational deviance concerns destructive behaviours directed at the organization, such as purposely showing up late for work, spoiling the work environment, taking long breaks, and stealing work property (Bennett & Robinson, 2000). Other discernable deviant acts include physical mistreatment, voiced abuse, calculated errors or harm, robbery, destroying or wasting property, failure to report work-related problems, quitting work, estrangement inclusive of absenteeism and sluggishness, and reduced performance evaluations (Bolton et al., 2010; Kelloway et al., 2010; Kuenzi et al., 2019; Spector & Fox, 2005; Sulea et al., 2009; Tiwari & Jha, 2021). Well-documented effects of this organizational malpractice include delaying work processes, efficiency, and financial output (Aube et al., 2009; Hollinger & Adams, 2010) that point to a need for eliminating this malpractice, as organizations where deviance is a norm pay a considerable price. Therefore, such organizations must commit to eliminating or minimizing factors that precede or trigger deviant acts in employees.

The preceding discussion elucidates that organizations must recognize antecedents to organizational deviance and identify buffering factors to offset the triggering of deviant acts in employees for sustained performance. Yet, there seems to be a dearth of studies on the topic. Albeit a substantial body of literature has focused on examining correlates of organizational deviance, including antecedents to organizational deviance such as personal differences (Hsi, 2017; Lugosi, 2019; Marcus & Schuler, 2004; Zellars et al., 2002), organizational citizenship behaviours (Fox et al., 2012), trait aggression and emotional instability (Clark, 2013; Zhang et al., 2019) as well as situational factors including organizational justice (Colquitt et al., 2001), and work stressors (Roxana, 2013). These studies demonstrate that negative, undesirable workplace occurrences are responsible for deviant acts of employees at work. More substantial evidence for this claim lies in the study by Scott and Barnes (2011), which found that negative emotions fully mediated social injustice at work and organizational deviance. Similarly, Metofe (2017) concluded that deviant acts respond to negative emotions elicited by situations, such as anger and frustra-

tion. In sum, relevant literature demonstrates that negative occurrences and emotions at work trigger deviant acts. Few Asian-based studies on organizational deviance (Dar & Rahman, 2019; Fatima et al., 2013; Khan et al., 2013; Rahim et al., 2016) also fall short of identifying organizational factors that may trigger organizational deviance.

Moreover, current literature lacks studies investigating means and ways to offset destructive bullying outcomes. Arguably, gratitude presents a positive employee strength (Emmons & Stern, 2013) that may buffer the relationships between workplace bullying and organizational deviance. Some recent empirical studies (Cunha et al., 2019; Witvliet et al., 2018) establish that gratitude enhances happiness, life satisfaction, positivity and suppresses sadness and negativity pointing to a constructive role of gratitude. Yet no study could be located that has suggested gratitude as a means to diminish negative, destructive bullying outcomes, specifically organizational deviance, through the employment of gratitude, a positive psychological variable.

Given the research gaps explained above, the present study aims to propose and test whether bullying at the workplace elicits deviant acts among bullied workers and whether gratitude moderates the relationship between workplace bullying and organizational deviance. This study contributes to the existing literature in two ways: first, by empirically testing organizational deviance as a bullying outcome and testing a possible moderating effect of gratitude on the workplace bullying and organizational deviance relationship.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Workplace Bullying and Organizational Deviance

Workplace bullying is a negative workplace occurrence that may trigger organizational deviance yet remains under investigation. Workplace bullying refers to "...harassing, offending, socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone's work tasks. In order for the label bullying (or mobbing) to be applied to a particular activity, interaction or process, it has to occur constantly and repeatedly (e.g. weekly) and over a period of time (e.g. about six months)." (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2010). Workplace bullying is an undesirable occurrence at work that has received considerable attention in organizational behaviour research (Baillien et al., 2013; Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996; Lutgen-Sandvik & Tracy, 2012; Mathisen et al., 2011; Pate & Beaumont, 2010) and has proven harmful effects. It involves acts that harm victims' tasks, such as denying valid information and/or resources, delegating arduous tasks, and creating work urgency (Brotheridge & Lee, 2010; Mawritz et al., 2014).

Organizational deviance has behavioural, emotional, and cognitive components. Parallel to disputes and biases found in job circumstances constraining an employee's aims, deviant acts result from job stress that calls for an adverse emotional response (Meier & Spector, 2013; Spector & Fox, 2005). It seems plausible that such malicious bullying acts experienced at work call for a revengeful response in a bullied employee as negative reactions. Along similar lines, earlier literature indicates that ill-treated workers suffer from several problems and ailments, including fatigue, melancholy, inability, infuriation, lessened efficacy and attention, and even alcohol abuse (Keashley & Neuman, 2010; Mackey et al., 2019; Richman et al., 1992). Further, studies have found positive correlations between supervisor bullying and undesirable variables, including negative affectivity, aggressiveness, and low self-esteem in the bullied worker (Aquino & Bradfield, 2000; Blanc et al., 2002). Similarly, Meier and Spector (2013) found a reciprocal relationship between work stressors and organizational deviance. Tiwari and Jha (2021) concluded that organizational deviance is linked with abusive supervision and toxic work culture, resembling workplace bullying.

Moreover, meta-analytical evidence indicates the detrimental impact of workplace deviance on several employee outcomes (Mackey et al., 2019). These findings suggest that supervisor bullying is likely to trigger deviant acts. Therefore, it may be argued that bullied employees are likely to engage in vengeful, deviant acts due to the supervisor bullying they suffer at work. Organizational deviance, therefore, is an expected outcome of workplace bullying. The following hypothesis is thus suggested:

H1: Supervisor bullying positively correlate with deviant acts in bullied employees.

Gratitude as Moderator

Defined as "...a generalized tendency to recognize and respond with grateful emotion to the roles of other people's benevolence in the positive experiences and outcomes that one obtains" (McCullough et al., 2002), gratitude is a positive emotion elicited in an individual upon the realization of a gain purposefully extended by another party (McCullough et al., 2001). There is sufficient empirical work on gratitude rooted in theology and philosophy (Algoe et al., 2008; Allport et al., 1948). Gratitude is recognized as a distinct positive concept and relates positively with other positive constructs, including positive affect, happiness, and hope, and correlates negatively with negative constructs, including negative affect, anxiety and depression (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Emmons & Shelton, 2002; McCullough et al., 2002; Weiner et al., 1979). These studies point to a positive quality and valence of gratitude. Gratitude is a more

comprehensive interpersonal mechanism that amplifies the outcome for organizational members by feeling thankful (Cameron et al., 2011; Demerouti et al., 2014).

Similarly, McCullough et al. (2001) postulated that experiencing gratitude prompted the motivation to perform moral, affirmative social behaviour and the drive to impede negative behaviours. According to a study by Grant and Wrzesniewski (2010), gratitude strengthens the relationship between core self-evaluations and job performance. Based on these studies, it seems plausible to argue for the utility of gratitude for suppressing adverse organizational acts. These studies provide good evidence for a constructive role of gratitude for employee outcomes during stressful bullying occurrences at work. In addition, gratitude compels the beneficiary to want to repay past kind acts over the long run (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Lambert et al., 2011). It may be argued that gratitude is likely to stifle the triggering of deviant acts in bullied employees so that bullied victims who experience higher gratitude will indulge in lesser organizational deviance. Those bullied victims who experience lesser gratitude will experience higher organizational deviance. Therefore, gratitude will moderate workplace bullying and organizational deviance such that the relationship will be less positive for those high on gratitude and more positive for those low on gratitude. This relationship is likely to be strong in the Asian culture, as religiosity and spirituality are notable components within the Asian culture, and gratitude is related to both religiosity and spirituality (Davis et al., 2009; Gilligan & Furness, 2006). It may thus be suggested that gratitude is likely to offset the triggering of deviant acts in bullied employees who feel spiritually and theologically obligated to their organization. The following hypothesis is thus postulated:

H2: Gratitude moderates the relationship between workplace bullying and organizational deviance, such that the relationship is weakly positive for bullied individual who are high on gratitude and strongly positive for those bullied individual who are low on gratitude.

METHODOLOGY

Sample and Data Collection

The study hypotheses were tested by employing a correlational study design. Using convenience sampling, personal and professional references were asked to disseminate the survey instrument across regional offices of five telecom sector organizations and six public and private sector higher education institutes and universities based in the capital city, Islamabad and its neighbour Rawalpindi. Both these cities have a well-educated workforce. Participation in the survey was voluntary, and respondents were explained the academic

purpose of survey and were assured that their responses would remain confidential and anonymous. They were also told that to reduce social desirability bias, their responses would be used as collective scores, not individual answers. A total of three hundred questionnaire booklets were given out, while 215 complete, usable replies were received, the response rate being 71.6%. The mean age for respondents was 35 years ($SD=2.4$), most respondents were men (62%), the majority had a master's degree (88%), had an organizational tenure of 5.4 years, and belonged to private organizations (77%).

Instruments

Negative Acts Questionnaire (NAQ)

Workplace bullying was measured using the 22-item NAQ (Einarsen et al., 2009). The NAQ has three dimensions, i.e. work-related bullying, person-related bullying, and physical intimidation bullying, that assess exposure to bullying acts over the past six months along a 5-point frequency scale ranging from 'never' (1) to 'daily' (5). Sample items include: 'someone withholds information which affects your performance', 'being ordered to do work below your level of competence', 'being given tasks with unreasonable deadlines. The total score on workplace bullying was generated by separately summing scores for its three dimensions and then totalling subscales scores to obtain an overall score on workplace bullying. The NAQ showed sufficient internal consistency (Cronbach $\alpha=.89$). Several studies have employed and validated the NAQ to assess workplace bullying (Escartin et al., 2013; Kakoulakis et al., 2015; Notelaers et al., 2010; Van De Vliert et al., 2013), pointing to the robustness of the measure.

Organizational Deviance Measure

Bennett and Robinson (2000) Workplace Deviance instrument comprising 19 items with two dimensions of interpersonal deviance (7 items) and organizational deviance (12 items) was employed to assess workplace deviance along a 7-point Likert type agreement scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' (1) to 'strongly agree' (7). Subscales' scores were totalled to generate an overall organizational deviance score, and item scores were added to create an overall score on workplace deviance. The internal consistency of the scale was acceptable (Cronbach $\alpha=.82$). The Workplace Deviance measure has been used in earlier studies (Berry et al., 2007; Judge et al., 2006; Promsri, 2018) employed this research instrument in their study.

Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ-6)

Mccullogh et al. (2002) Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ-6) was employed to tap gratitude. It comprises six items and measures individual gratitude along a 7-point Likert type agreement scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' (1) to 'strongly agree' (7). As the original scale measures gratitude in general life and people, items were slightly modified to tap the construct in the work context. Item scores were added to generate an overall gratitude score, and the scale demonstrated acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach $\alpha=.75$). Many studies have employed and validated the GQ-6 (Kleiman et al., 2013; Zeng et al., 2017).

Hypotheses-testing Procedures

Descriptive statistics, the respondents demographic profile, and the instruments internal consistency were calculated first. Hypothesis 1, which postulated a direct relationship between workplace bullying and organizational deviance, was tested using linear regression. In contrast, hypothesis 2, which had suggested a moderating role of gratitude on the workplace bullying — organizational deviance relationship, was tested using Baron and Kenny (1986) hierarchical regression method. Using the suggested approach, z scores to standardize the independent and moderator variables were generated first to lessen correlations, followed by multiplying the two variables to create a product term of the two (Frazier et al., 2004). Next, hierarchical regression was conducted to test the suggested moderation effect of gratitude on workplace bullying — organizational deviance relationship. As recommended, organizational deviance (dependent variable) was regressed on workplace bullying (independent variable) in the first step. In contrast, the product term was entered as the independent variable in the second step. A significant product term signifies the presence of a moderation effect in the regression model (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Cohen et al., 2013).

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics, internal consistency, and bivariate correlations among all study variables. As the table shows, the mean age of respondents was 35+ 2.4 years, the mean organization tenure was 5.41 years, and most held a master's degree. As for correlations, workplace bullying correlated negatively with gratitude ($\gamma=-.45$, $p<.05$) and positively with organizational deviance ($\gamma=.52$, $p<.05$). Also, gratitude correlated negatively with organizational deviance ($\gamma=-.40$, $p<.05$). All correlations were in the predictable direction, implying support for both study hypotheses.

Table 1.
Descriptive Statistics, Internal Consistency, and Correlations among Study Variables

Variable	Mean	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Age (years)	35 + 2.4	-					
2. Organization tenure (years)	5.41	.32*	-				
3. Education (masters)	.23	.18*	.21*	-			
4. Workplace bullying	2.21	.20*	.27**	.32**	(.89)		
5. Gratitude	2.02	.14*	.30**	.20**	-.45**	(.75)	
6. Organisational deviance	2.34	-.13*	-.23**	.04**	.52**	-.40**	(.82)

Note: N = 215; Cronbach alpha for each scale are shown in parenthesis. *p < .000, **p < .05.

Table 2.
Results of Regression Analysis to test Direct Effect of Workplace Bullying on Organisational Deviance (H1)

	Organisational deviance		
	β	SE	R2
Age	.03		
Gender	.02*		
Organisation tenure	-.05	.07	.08
Workplace bullying	.45*	.83	.42

Note: N = 215 *p < .01.

Table 2 presents results of linear regression analysis to test the hypothesised workplace bullying – organisational deviance relationship. As maybe seen, the hypothesised relationship was significant ($R^2 = .42$, $p < .000$, $\beta = .45$, $p < .01$) indicating that workplace bullying accounted for 42% variance in organisational deviance, thereby confirming hypothesis 1.

Table 3.
Results of Hierarchical Regression Analysis to test Gratitude as Moderator of Workplace Bullying — Organisational Deviance Relationship (H2)

	Organisational deviance		
	β	R2	R2
Workplace bullying	.32*		
Gratitude	-.41*	.50	.
Workplace bullying* gratitude	-.20**	.52	.02**

Note: N = 215; *p < .001, **p < .005.

Table 3 presents results of hierarchical regression to test moderating effect of gratitude on the workplace bullying — organisational deviance relationship. As is evident from the Table 3, the interaction term of workplace bullying and gratitude was significant ($R^2=.52$, $\beta=-.20$, $p<.005$) indicating that gratitude indeed buffered the workplace bullying–organisational deviance relationship [Baron and Kenny \(1986\)](#). Specifically, gratitude brought 2% significant additional variance ($\Delta R^2=.02$, $p<.005$) in the regression model. Hypothesis 2 thus found full support.

DISCUSSION

The present study sought to theoretically and empirically test whether workplace bullying triggered organizational deviance and whether gratitude, a positive variable, moderated the relationship between workplace bullying and organizational deviance. Results confirmed both study hypotheses. The finding of this study is that organizational deviance is indeed caused by bullying at work, and the relationship between workplace bullying and organizational deviance is moderated by gratitude in such a way that it is strongly positive for bullied employees with low gratitude and weakly positive for bullied employees with high gratitude.

Support for hypothesis 1 suggested that workplace bullying and organizational deviance would positively extend the literature on workplace bullying by proving that organizational deviance is a notable bullying outcome. Due to ongoing organizational changes, external and internal transformations, and work design shortcomings, higher-ups are inclined to pressure employees to follow through with work assignments and projects ([Feijo et al., 2019](#)), fostering a bullying prone work context. As a reaction to recurrent bullying, employees subsequently experience feelings of negative payback and vengeance toward the organization and its people. Specifically, bullied employees indulge in damaging, retaliatory behaviours that harm the organization, its property, resources, and people, i.e., they indulge in deviant behaviours to purposefully cause organizational harm. This finding agrees with earlier studies that have reported damaging effects of bullying on physical and mental health ([Djurkovic et al., 2004](#)), organizational commitment ([Bulutlar & Oz, 2009](#)), and environmental factors ([Akella, 2016](#); [Appelbaum et al., 2012](#)).

Another important finding of this study is that gratitude moderates the workplace bullying and organizational deviance relationship such that bullied employees with high gratitude indulge in lesser deviant acts as an outcome of bullying, unlike bullied workers with lower gratitude, for whom the relationship is stronger, implying that these bullied employees indulge in more deviant acts as a form of vengeance to bullying. In concurrence with this finding, [Mccullogh](#)

et al. (2002) suggested that gratitude thwarts cynical feelings as antagonism and resentment. As such, gratitude assists in valuing constructive aspects of life, cherishing blessed features of one's life, encourages constructive analysis of harmful occurrences (Emmons & Stern, 2013; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006; Tsang, 2006), and boosts individual and organizational well-being (Ting, 2017).

The present study adds to contemporary literature establishing that bullying triggers deviance in bullied employees, while gratitude, a positive variable, moderates the workplace bullying — organizational deviance relationship, such that bullied workers who are high on gratitude experience lesser deviance in response to bullying as opposed to bullied employees who are lesser on gratitude and indulge in more deviant acts in response to bullying.

This study was guided by two aims: first, to empirically examine if workplace bullying triggers counterproductive acts in bullied employees; second, to empirically test if gratitude, being a positive employee strength, moderates the workplace bullying — counterproductive work behaviour relationship. Results confirmed both proposed hypotheses. Overall, findings of this research indicate that bullied workers indulge in damaging, harmful acts directed at the organization and other workers as revenge for the bullying experienced (counterproductive work behaviours), yet this association is stronger for those bullied employees who are low on gratitude, while the association is weaker for those bullied employees with high gratitude levels. In sum, these results emphasize that bullying is an organizational menace with destructive consequences for individuals and organizations. Positive virtues, specific gratitude, ought to be nurtured and fostered in employees and organizational settings to offset its harmful effects.

ORGANIZATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Organizations may take essential measures in light of the results of this study. Firstly, despite the rapid, unexpected changes in the corporate world, steps must be taken to reduce bullying within the work environment. Managers should recognize that along with a change comes the increased risk of bullying incidents, as managers are rushed to goal attainment and success in pursuit of which they bully their subordinates. Policymakers and human resource managers also need to understand that bullying subordinates would trigger a revengeful mindset in bullied employees, and they would indulge in deviant acts to harm the organization and its members. Policies and strategies, as well as workshops and training, should be held in organizations, particularly those that consistently change, to create awareness of deviant actions; this would help bullied employees remain mindful and conscious of their actions. In addition,

managers should design and implement policies to keep a check and balance to decrease deviant employee acts, such as implementing timed breaks, offering counseling services for maltreated workers, dealing with increased absenteeism and tardiness, etc. Further, as a training intervention strategy, training must be planned to enhance employee gratitude towards the organizations, work, and general.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

This study has important strengths. First, well-established, validated instruments with good psychometric properties were used to measure the study variables, giving good confidence in the findings. Second, data were collected from two work contexts, i.e. the telecommunication and health sectors, both likely to endure frequent pressure and change that arguably makes them bullying-prone work settings. Hence, study hypotheses have been tested in the matching corresponding work environments.

The limitations of this study should also be recognized. First, this study used a cross-section study design that is viewed as restricted for addressing causal relationships (Zapf et al., 1996). Secondly, the R^2 should be acknowledged as being a small effects size (Cohen, 1988). However, according to Darlington (1968) moderation effects are always slight — probably as the moderation testing procedure involves creating a product term of the independent and moderation variable (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

Future research should examine other possible effects of bullying, for which there is a growing need in Pakistan due to the scarcity of studies. A longitudinal study design is more likely to clarify causal relationships, so it is recommended for future studies. Future studies can also examine other positive variables that are likely to influence the effect of workplace bullying on deviant acts. Further, studies may logically employ a mediator related to work design to help better comprehend relationships between bullying, its outcomes, and how these relationships are influenced by work design and positive variables.

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