

Exploring the Escalation Process of Academic Bullying: A Qualitative Study

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Higher education in India is known to have a high incidence of workplace bullying, but less is known about the mechanisms of escalation. The present study pinpoints the elements of escalation and their characteristics within academic bullying. The thematic analysis of the data collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews of twenty faculty members in private-unaided colleges across India, identified six common elements of escalation: trigger, resources assessment, reactance, rejection, helplessness and withdrawal. This study will help employers to establish more effective anti-bullying policies. Additionally, this study is one of the few attempts to address academic bullying in the Indian context.

Keywords: higher education, workplace bullying, academic bullying, escalation

INTRODUCTION

Bullying is a prevalent problem in many organisations, including higher education institutions (Barratt-Pugh and Krestelica, 2018). Bullying in academic settings devastates careers, lives, and institutions (Jones, 2013). The subject has gained academic scholars' attention over the last three decades and has been portrayed as a process that evolves and intensifies with time (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, and Cooper, 2003). Bullying can be an escalation of the conflict (Zapf and Gross, 2001), where the verb 'escalate' refers to an increase in magnitude or severity (Collins dictionary). Escalations are often studied as manifestations of workplace bullying in different phases (e.g. Rai and Agarwal, 2017). There is, however, a lack of clarity over the manifesting elements of bullying escalation, and they may differ depending on the sector (Vartia 1996). In this study, we examine the process of workplace bullying in higher education to identify the common escalating elements and characteristics.

The importance of identifying the common elements in the escalation process cannot be overstated. A major aspect of workplace bullying is its covert and subjective nature (Nielsen, Matthiesen, and Einarsen, 2010) and may not readily be observed, understood, or reported until it has progressed considerably. It may be possible to unravel the process more effectively if practitioners understand the escalating elements. Additionally, motivating and enabling factors, such as culture, can significantly impact the process (Salin, 2003). In light of this, workplace bullying studies require more research to address sectors with different motivating and enabling factors. Very few studies examined the escalation process of bullying in the higher education sector in India (e.g. Krishna and Soumyaja, 2020). This study is a rare attempt to explore and

understand the escalating elements of bullying among academic faculty members in private-unaided colleges through qualitative in-depth interviews.

Many researchers have identified phases of workplace bullying (e.g. Heinz Leymann, 1990), and these studies provide a great deal of insight into how workplace bullying occurs in different sectors. However, the number of studies unveiling the process of bullying is relatively less (e.g. Rai and Agarwal, 2017), specifically in academic bullying (Miller et al., 2018; Krishna and Soumyaja, 2020; Keashly, 2021). The present study approached bullying from a gender-neutral perspective rather than a gendered perspective; therefore, we answered the call by Krishna and Soumyaja (2020) to explore the faculty experience from a gender-neutral perspective. Similarly, by studying academic bullying in a specific higher education setting, i.e. private-unaided colleges, we are responding to the call for additional research by Miller et al. (2018). Additionally, these studies could not focus exclusively on escalating elements and the increase in severity or magnitude of their characteristics. Here, an in-depth interview provides the opportunity to develop a deep understanding of how the bullying elements escalate over the period. Hence, this study attempt to develop a new conceptual understanding of the escalation process of bullying in the higher education sector.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Heinz Leymann (1990) shifted the focus of research from school bullying to workplace bullying and coined the term ‘mobbing’ for group bullying. Bullying refers to various negative behaviours that negatively affect employee performance in the workplace, such as harassment, offensive language, and social exclusion (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, and Cooper, 2003). Other characteristics of workplace bullying include its power disparity (actual/perceived), frequency (once a week) and duration (six months). This process often intensifies with time and can last for at least six months (Leymann, 1990). Throughout this duration, the target experiences repeated negative actions in the workplace, characterised by the dynamic mechanism of attitudinal and behavioural consequences. It is usually either a step-by-step or continuous process for bullying to progress from early to late stages (Zapf and Gross, 2001).

Workplace bullying is unethical, patterned, repeated, and occurs within power relationships. We reviewed prior research within the area and located numerous approaches and contradictory perspectives to better understand workplace bullying and its patterns, phases, or stages. Bullying phases are often framed from the conflict management perspective (Zapf and Gross, 2001). Different perspectives on bullying can be found even within the same approach. Leymann (1990) viewed bullying as the final stage of victimisation, while Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, and Cooper (2011) viewed bullying as a continuum. However, only a few studies have examined the escalation process of bullying in higher education (Krishna and Soumyaja, 2020), and thus, the escalation process, its patterns, its elements and its characteristics are relatively underexplored. Here, we attempt to identify and understand the elements of academic bullying as it escalates.

Academic Bullying

Academic institutions’ unique cultural and structural characteristics contribute to academic bullying (Keashly, 2021). Generally, higher education organisations have top-down structures (Twale and De Luca, 2008) and university administration usually fails to effectively manage academic bullying complaints despite having an anti-bullying policy (Hodgins and McNamara, 2019). Bullying escalation is too often overlooked when formulating anti-bullying policies, which can undermine their effectiveness. For example, it may not be possible to mitigate the emotional damage caused to the victim by an anti-bullying policy which concentrates solely on the bully’s manifested behaviour. Furthermore, as bullying escalates, not only does its harassment increase, but also victims’ response motivation, coping behaviours, and health may worsen over time. Thus far, studies of the bullying process have been unable to uncover escalating elements while they focus on escalating manifestations or coping behaviour. This study attempted to elucidate the elements of bullying escalation in Indian higher education.

Universities, colleges, and stand-alone institutions constitute higher education in India (AISHE, 2015/2016). Colleges can be both public (government) and private (private-aided/ private-unaided). In

private-aided colleges, lecturers' remuneration is funded by government grants, while in private-unaided colleges, grants are not available from the government. In the private-unaided college setting, faculty members may be more likely to be targeted for bullying due to their low power status, the uncertainty of their employment, and the ease of their replacement (Krishna and Soumyaja, 2020). The present study focus on the bullying experiences of the faculty members in private-unaided colleges.

Following the review of the literature, we identified the following research questions:

RQ1. What are the escalating elements of academic bullying?

RQ2. How are these elements escalating based on its characteristics?

METHODOLOGY

The study examined the bullying experiences of college faculty members at private-unaided colleges who were self-identified as victims of severe forms of academic bullying. In-depth interviews were used to collect data. A survey was sent to 250 faculty members of unaided colleges in south India using the email addresses gathered from college websites. There were a number of items in the questionnaire, including items from NAQ-R (Einarsen, Hoel, and Notelaers, 2009), a direct question asking whether they were bullied at work, as well as an open-ended question asking if they were aware of anyone else who had been bullied. Forty-five people filled out the questionnaire.

NAQ-R includes 22 items measuring workplace bullying, consisting of work-related and person-related items. The respondents were asked to rate the frequency of the items on a five-point Likert scale (never (1) to daily (5)). For the study, we selected 25 college faculty members who had answered "yes" to the general question and had a frequency of once every week for at least one item. Researchers contacted victims by phone to discuss their experience of victimization and availability for an interview. The conversation lasted for less than five minutes and centred on understanding the duration of victimization and their willingness to explain incidents. In the end, 20 respondents who reported bullying for at least six months were selected for in-depth interviews. Audio recordings of all of the interviews were taken with the participants' permission and lasted 60-90 minutes. The participants were assured that their personal details and identities would be kept confidential. In the manuscript, we, therefore, used pseudonyms. Most of the participants were assistant professors holding postgraduate degrees.

The Interview Coding

In a semi-structured interview, prompts were used to frame questions about:

- Their bullying experiences
- Their response to bullying and how it worsens

The recorded interviews were transcribed, and themes were generated using in vivo coding. After discussing with the experts, the themes are derived through thematic analysis and the constant comparison method (Corbin and Strauss 1998) to answer the research questions.

FINDINGS

The analysis generated six themes (elements) of escalation: trigger, resources assessment, reactance, rejection, helplessness and withdrawal. The themes, meaning and characteristics are detailed in Table I.

TABLE I
IDENTIFIED THEMES, MEANING AND CHARACTERISTICS

Sl.No	Themes/ Escalating element	Definition/ Meaning	Characteristics	Exemplar
1	Trigger	Incidents or events initiated against a victim and leading to negative outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many triggers over the escalating period • Exposure to triggers increases over time • Covert to overt forms (become more visible) 	<p>“I initially thought he was teaching me, and I appreciated his suggestions. Eventually, these suggestions changed to blaming and humiliation. I spoke with our principal. When the principal did nothing, he made more visible strategies, including talking negatively about me to my students.”</p>
2	Resources assessment	It involves victims evaluating the situation and the available resources based on assumptions about the root cause of the mistreatment and expectations about controlling the outcome.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initially, resources are assessed to constructive coping • The victims turned to more resources as the bullying got worse • The base of assessment expands and the aim changed to passive coping 	<p>“Several months ago, I confronted one of them about unequally distributing workloads among our department members and making mine heavier than the others. I got blamed for everything later on, whether I was involved or not. There were times I considered quitting. However, I changed my mind when I looked at my finances”</p>
3	Reactance	The motivation aroused to restore freedom when the individual’s freedom is threatened.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initially, more motivated to regain control compared to later stages • Initially, the reactance were more self-focused and later, it became outer-focused 	<p>- “I worked really hard to please him.” - “Even after many faculty members and myself reported her to management, she continued to get away with rude remarks and bullying at work.”</p>

4	Rejection	The non-acceptance or futile attempts to regain a normal stage of 'no bullying'.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ignored early rejections When bullying escalates, the victim is subjected to more serious rejection, such as rejection from management 	<p>-“I tried my best to satisfy her, but it never worked”</p> <p>-“My worst nightmare came true. I filed a complaint with management. The team “investigated” and I was fired”</p>
5	Helplessness and withdrawal	Victims feel helpless when their efforts do not yield desired results; Helpless victims often withdraw permanently or temporarily from situations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participants felt helpless every time they were rejected. Initially, the helplessness was temporary (for short period) In the advanced phases, the participants faced more severe rejections and they felt extremely helpless 	<p>- “I experienced helplessness in dealing with my suffering.”</p> <p>- “There is no other way out. I have to leave. I’m on notice now.”</p>

Trigger

This stage describes exposure to negative behaviour from the initial phase to the advanced phase of escalation. Here, negative incidents are referred to as triggers, which are incidents or events initiated against a victim and leading to negative outcomes. Most of the interviewees could not pinpoint the exact initial incident of bullying. However, they agreed that in the beginning, mistreatments were perceived as subtle, ambiguous, and indirect forms of aggression that were difficult to identify. One respondent, Sarayu, stated that,

When I gave my suggestion to our new HOD, he disregarded it and made it seem funny. Later, whenever he had a chance, he would make fun of me. Initially, I did not feel anything bad, but he kept reminding me of my mistakes. I tried to avoid them.

Another participant Mahadev noted that.

One year back, a new faculty member who knows our chairman well joined our department. He easily got acceptance and respect among our faculty group. Initially, I also felt he is a nice person. However, he used to make personal jokes about me in front of others. I neglected it at first, but it increased over time. Later, he started to hinder my opportunities saying I am good for nothing. That was really shocking.

The study found that bullies manipulate activities to stigmatise their targets, and their negative behaviour becomes apparent with time. Thus the exposure to uncontrollable circumstances (triggers) increases over time.

Resources Assessment

The study found that each time the target faces mistreatment, the victims assess the available resources for controlling the outcome, and this stage is mentioned as resources assessment. Initially, they either tended

to ignore the issue or use whatever resources they had to reduce the conflict constructively. A participant, Arunima, noted:

I worked extra hours when I started teaching, and I thought all teachers did the same. However, I found out that one of my senior colleagues took many unnecessary leaves, and I was his only replacement. I asked him to consider another faculty member with free hours because there were many portions left to finish on my subject, but he complained to the principal, who scolded me.

The participant here is trying to solve the problem constructively by exploring alternative solutions and using negotiation skills. Over time, as the bullying became worse, the victims turned to other resources. The target may assess the situation and available resources based on the probability of perceived rejection from their colleagues. For example, Karuna, a young faculty member, stated that

The colleague (bully) was very close to our director, so he was well respected among our faculty group. I feared that if I told anyone about him, I might not survive.

The analysis also indicated that individuals assess the importance of choices like surviving in the organisation or quitting the job after analysing the possible financial impact of leaving the job and the difficulty of finding a new job. As an example, Jacob, an assistant professor that:

I feared losing my job, which I cannot afford. I wanted to stay there until I find a new job.

Additionally, they fear that they will lose the comforts or privileges they enjoy at work if they make complaints. For example, another participant, Venu stated that:

If I complain about the way the coordinator talks to me without respect and labels me every day, I may lose the privilege of having a flexible schedule at the college.

Reactance

The analysis revealed that individuals wanted to regain control at work; here, we refer to this motivation as 'reactance'. Reactance is the motivation aroused to restore freedom when the individual's freedom is threatened. Few respondents indicated that they responded to bullying passively, such as by ignoring the bully; however, 3 participants attempted to negotiate or confront the bully. The active response also included improving their performance and muttering apologies to prevent the worsening of the conflict. Reshmi, an experienced assistant professor, stated that:

I thought I needed to improve my performance to please my principal. I worked hard. But it was of no use as he did not notice my effort. He continued blaming me. I tried to avoid him.

Rajasree, another assistant professor stated that:

Initially, I thought I should speak with the senior faculty member (bully) who may not be deliberately harassing me. But she was not ready to listen to me.

Due to the aroused reactance, many participants discussed the experience with family and colleagues. At least half of the participants informed the principal or management about the problem. There were mostly informal discussions, though four participants wrote letters of complaint. The target may therefore use both formal and informal methods to resist the bullying.

Rejection

Our study found that the victim's aroused reactance and the resulting activities are often ineffective or neglected in workplace bullying. This stage of non-acceptance or futile experience is labelled as 'rejection'. In addition to not being successful in negotiating with the bully, participants noted they were not successful in ignoring bullies or improving performance. These unsuccessful attempts were referred to as rejection. The victims were initially not taken seriously, but later on, they faced more severe setbacks like rejections from management for formal complaints. The victims indicated that formal responses worsened the problem and backfired. For example, Midhun, a participant, shared his experience of complaining:

I thought the management would stand against harassment. Hence, I filed a formal complaint. I never heard from the management, and rumours about the complaint worsened the situation. I followed up with our principal a few days later to find out what was happening with my complaint. He said he had a lot of other serious jobs to do in an angry tone.

Participants indicated that informal meetings with the managers had not resulted in satisfactory outcomes and led to cynicism about informal responses.

Helplessness and Withdrawal

After their efforts failed to produce the desired results, victims felt helpless and less motivated to act. Participants felt helpless every time they were rejected. Initially, the helplessness was temporary, and they tried other methods to get control over their situation. They felt severe helplessness as they advanced in the process and faced more serious rejections. Participants wanted to withdraw from situations, either temporarily or permanently, as they became helpless. Most participants remained silent and intended to quit permanently, while a few took long leaves. According to Arabhi, a participant:

In the beginning, I remained silent and took a leave of absence from my college. Now, I am seriously considering leaving this job. However, I feel I have zero confidence.

Study results showed that they choose either neglect (e.g. keeping silent) or exit (temporary like taking extended leave/ permanent like quitting their job) as coping strategies.

DISCUSSION

This study uncovered six common elements in the escalation of academic bullying. The six themes emerged: trigger, resources assessment, reactance, rejection, helplessness and withdrawal. These elements were supported by previous studies, as outlined below.

Studies have previously shown many triggers associated with workplace bullying. These triggers are also manifested as subtle forms of recurring mistreatment, as we found (Lewis, 2006; Karatuna, 2015; Rai and Agarwal, 2017). Our findings are also consistent with previous studies such as Leymann (1990) and Pamela Lutgen-Sandvik (2003), who also found that harassment worsens with escalation and activities are manipulated to stigmatise the victim over time.

The theme resources assessment of this study is in line with that of Zabrodska, Ellwood, Zaeemdar, and Mudrak, (2016), who found that participants may evaluate the situation and available resources according to their perceptions of rejection from their colleagues and the anticipation of disciplinary action. In addition, the present study shows that the Resources assessment involves evaluating the possible financial effects. Similar results were found by McCormack, Djurkovic, and Casimir (2013), who demonstrated that victims assess the importance of choosing between staying in the organisation and quitting after considering the financial cost, the time it would take to find a new job, and the risk of losing their self-image if they quit. Furthermore, we found that targets are afraid of losing their workplace

privileges if they complain. The findings of Lewis (2006) and Thomas (2005) support the conclusion that victims may also feel threatened by the prospect of losing resources and competence perceptions.

The literature also supports the reactance identified in our study. For example, Karatuna (2015) indicated that victims may self-blame or ignore the bully, negotiate or confront the bully. Similarly, D’Cruz and Noronha (2010) indicated that victims improve their performance, and Zabrodska, Ellwood, Zaeemdar, and Mudrak (2016) found apologies muttered by victims in order to prevent the worsening of the conflict. The literature also supports the rejection identified in our study. Studies like Pamela Lutgen-Sandvik, (2003) and D’Cruz and Noronha (2010) also reported ‘rejection’ experiences. In the present study, many victims alleged that they felt powerless and under-resourced. This may cause them to retreat from a situation or even walk away from it entirely. Similarly, studies have shown that victims who become helpless may withdraw temporarily or permanently (Leymann, 1996; Pamela Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003) or suffer silently (Rai and Agarwal, 2017).

According to the second research question, we found the following characteristics in these elements as they escalate.

Triggers

The study found that exposure to triggers increases over time, shifting from covert to overt forms (becomes more visible). Studies have mentioned covert and overt patterns (e.g., MacIntosh, 2005). Research has not been able to observe the changes in these patterns over time, and this study found that bullying manifestations become more evident with the escalation in the academic setting we studied.

Resources Assessment

Initially, resources are assessed for constructive coping. Eventually, the focus changes to passive coping. As bullying escalates, more resources are sought by victims and the assessment base is expanded. Our study confirms Zapf and Gross (2001) that the first phase of bullying was constructive because of rational and controlled intervention, with minimal collaboration between participants.

Reactance

In the initial phase, victims are more motivated to regain control than they are in the later stage. At first, their reactions are more self-focused, and then they become more outer-focused. Many studies indicate this conclusion. For example, D’Cruz and Noronha (2010) indicated that the victims experienced confusion in the early phases (self-focused), while later, they tend to engage in organisational options (outer-focused).

Rejection

The results also indicated that victims of bullying experienced more serious rejection when the bullying escalates. Previous research did not explore the escalating nature of rejection. However, futile experiences were mentioned (e.g., rejection from HR; D’Cruz and Noronha, 2010).

Helplessness and Withdrawal

The participants initially experienced temporary (short-term) helplessness. They faced more severe rejections as the phases progressed and felt extreme helplessness. Previous studies have not examined the escalating nature of helplessness. Researchers have found manifestations of helplessness in many forms but did not mention the severity of its escalating. During the initial phases, they may have a lot of unexplored options to solve the problem, but as the phases progress, they may have tackled these options one by one. Therefore, the victim may experience extreme helplessness at later stages since they are powerless to solve the problem.

CONCLUSION

This study has several practical and theoretical implications and adds to the existing literature by presenting a new avenue for further research. Victims’ perspectives will help formulate better anti-bullying

policies to prevent bullying and its escalation at work. Identifying their experiences as bullying and communicating them effectively are two of the biggest obstacles for victims. Management must also maintain clarity and consistency in monitoring workplace bullying to effectively implement the anti-bullying law. Researchers hope to use this research to develop strategies to prepare institutions and college faculty members to identify and communicate the bullying with clarity by focusing on each element of escalation. Focusing on these elements as a basis for determining bullying escalation will reduce the existing implementation gaps and enable colleges to protect their academic faculty members from bullying while ensuring academic freedom that fosters excellence. However, researchers continue to welcome more detailed studies to add specificity and measurability to these elements for easier use by institutions. An escalation scale can be developed with a more thorough study of these elements. For instance, in bullying, the widely accepted NAQ-R scale (Einarsen, Hoel, and Notelaers 2009) only measures the frequency of negative acts exposed and determines whether a person is bullied or not. It cannot provide any information on how far these acts escalated.

A unique aspect of this study is its attempt to identify the escalating elements and the characteristics of academic bullying. This study is also one of the few attempts to focus on the academic sector in India, particularly private-unaided colleges. The study can be extended to other colleges, universities, and stand-alone institutions where escalating elements may display different characteristics.

There are some limitations to the study. First, private-unaided colleges were considered where a specific anti-bullying policy is not available, and it may affect the characteristics of escalating elements. There are several private-unaided colleges in India with an anti-bullying policy in place. Second, the research methodology might impose limitations on the generalizability of the results. Therefore, more research is needed to validate these conclusions.

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