The Impact of Self-Esteem and Empathy on the Relationship between Workplace Bullying and Attachment Style

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— *Review of* —
Integrative Business & Economics
— *Research* —

ABSTRACT

Workplace bullying is an increasing concern in the workplace today, causing significant harm for both the individual as well as the organization. Workplace bullying is defined here as the repeated, malicious, and health-endangering mistreatment of an individual by one or more other individuals. This paper discusses how an individual's attachment style can impact workplace bullying, and how this relationship can be moderated by self-esteem as well as empathic concern and perspective taking. It is proposed here that an individual's attachment style (either secure or insecure) is related to bullying such that those with a secure attachment are less likely to exhibit workplace bullying behavior than those with an insecure attachment. Further, higher levels of self-esteem, empathic concern, and perspective taking can enhance this relationship for securely attached individuals. The paper also proposes that the more insecure one's attachment style, the more likely the individual is to exhibit bullying behavior with higher levels of self-esteem, empathic concern, and perspective taking weakening this relationship.

Keywords: Workplace bullying, attachment, self-esteem, empathy

1. INTRODUCTION

> In hatred as in love, we grow the thing we brood upon. What we loathe, we graft into our very soul. (Mary Ainsworth)

> Look at that face! Would anyone vote for that? Can you imagine that, the face of our next president? (Donald Trump on Carly Fiorina, September 9, 2015)

> Piglet sidled up to Pooh from behind. "Pooh?" he whispered. "Yes, Piglet?" "Nothing," said Piglet, taking Pooh's paw. "I just wanted to be sure of you." (A. A. Milne, 1928)

The current political climate in the United States has given impetus to the idea that it is acceptable to express and act upon one's more negative feelings towards others. Thus, there has been a noted increase in bullying in the schools (Bazelon, 2016) and it can be

anticipated that bullying will be increasing in the workplace as well. Even prior to the latest US presidential election cycle, workplace bullying has become an increasingly important topic in the business literature. The costs of bullying have been found to be significant for both individuals as well as organizations. Bullying is related to psychosomatic illness (Djurkovic, McCormack, & Casimir, 2004), alcohol abuse, (Richman, Flaherty, & Rospenda, 1996), post-traumatic stress disorder (Vartia, 2001, 2003), as well as reduced productivity (Hoel, Einarsen, & Cooper, 2003), decreased job satisfaction, reduced organizational commitment, and greater intention to leave (Tepper, 2000). Although bullying has been studied extensively in school settings and is now being studied more widely in the workplace, there is still a paucity of research analyzing the antecedents of bullying. This paper will consider how one's attachment to others, whether secure or insecure, may affect workplace bullying behavior. This paper argues that self-esteem and empathy are moderators of the relationship between attachment and workplace bullying. A set of propositions for future research are presented.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW
2.1 Workplace Bullying
Workplace bullying has been defined as the repeated, malicious, and health-endangering mistreatment of another individual or individuals at work (Jennifer, Cowie, & Ananiadou, 2003; Einarsen, 1999; Namie & Namie, 2000). The majority of workplace bullying consists of nonphysical, indirect, and passive actions (Neuman & Baron, 1998). Emotional abuse, then, is the basis for much workplace bullying. Emotional abuse is the "repeated hostile verbal and nonverbal, often nonphysical behaviors directed at a person(s) such that the target's sense of him/herself as a competent worker and person is negatively affected" (Keashly & Jagatic, 2003).

Workplace bullying is carried out on 10% of the workplace at any one time, with 25-30% of employees being bullied at some time in their careers (Keashly & Neuman, 2005; Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy, & Alberts, 2005). Targets of workplace bullying have been found to have difficulty concentrating and lowered self-esteem and self-efficacy (Keashly & Neuman, 2005). Workplace bullying is related to negative emotions such as anger, resentment, and fear and has resulted in heightened levels of anxiety, depression, burnout, frustration, and helplessness (Keashly & Neuman, 2005). Bullying is also associated with a number of additional negative outcomes for individuals, including psychosomatic illness (Djurkovic, McCormack, & Casimir, 2004), reduced productivity (Hoel, Einarsen, & Cooper, 2003), alcohol abuse (Richman, Flaherty, & Rospenda, 1996), post-traumatic stress disorder (Vartia, 2001, 2003). Organizational outcomes have included decreased job satisfaction, reduced organizational commitment, and greater intention to leave (Tepper, 2000). Although much is known about the outcomes of workplace bullying, little research exists on the etiology of the bully. This paper argues that attachment theory is an area of study that might provide useful insight on the impetus for bullying behavior.

2.2 Attachment Theory
Attachment theory is a conceptualization used to understand interpersonal processes or interactions with significant others throughout life (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980; Hazen & Shaver, 1987; Little, Nelson, Wallace & Johnson, 2011; Mikulincer, Florian, Cowan & Cowan, 2002). According to attachment theory, individuals begin to construct models of the self in childhood that are formed due to the availability and

sensitivity of caregivers when they are toddlers (Bowlby, 1982; Bretherton, 1991). These representations are reworked across the individual's lifespan.

Attachment theory emerged from early studies with infants in which the interactions with the primary caregiver were analyzed (Bowlby, 1982). In these studies, it was found that infants develop internal working models in close relationships that shape an individual's self-image. The Strange Situation studies by Ainsworth and others (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Ainsworth & Bell, 1969; Blehar, Lieberman, & Ainsworth, 1977; Tracy & Ainsworth, 1981) were originally intended to analyze infants' behavior when presented with an unfamiliar playroom. Within the unfamiliar playroom were new toys for the infant as well as an unfamiliar adult. Versions of the experiment were run both when the mother was present and when she was absent.

Ainsworth and her colleagues were attempting to study the exploratory behavior of infants when their mothers were not present in this Strange Situation. However, the researchers were surprised to find that the behavior of infants when reunited with the mother were of the most interest. Some infants became distressed when the mother left the room and upon her return they sought physical contact with her. Others who were not distressed simply returned to the mother and sought some form of interaction. Both of these types of infants were said to have secure attachments. However, some of the infants would seek out contact with the mother alternating with tantrum-like behavior towards the mother. This pattern of behavior was found to be related to inconsistent responses of the mother to the infant's needs in his or her first year of life (Ainsworth, et al., 1978). These infants were determined to have anxious attachments to their mothers. Other infants, who avoided or disregarded the mother upon her return (Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1971), had mothers who had been insensitive to the infants' needs in the first three months of life. These mothers indicated both verbally and nonverbally that they disliked physical contact with the infant. The infants then tended to exhibit avoidant behavior (Ainsworth, et al., 1978).

Based on these results, it was theorized that individuals develop schemas or styles of attachment that continue throughout their lives (Bowlby, 1982). These styles of attachment relate to one's relationships, and relationship partners and include secure, anxious, and avoidant styles. A secure attachment is one in which another individual is available, sensitive, and responsive to an individual's needs. When a person is very young, the quality of interactions with the caregiver in times of need is a key variable in determining if the attachment will be secure (Bowlby, 1956). Individuals who are securely attached are able to perceive the world as generally safe, trust others to be available to them in times of need, and believe that interaction with others will be rewarding.

Failing to form an emotional bond with a caregiver increases the child's risk for interpersonal difficulties (Bowlby, 1982). Insecure attachments develop when one's attachment figure is inadequately available or nonresponsive. Insecure attachments were found to have at least two distinct types. When the attachment figure is sometimes responsive and sometimes not responsive, an insecure attachment classified as "anxious" develops. The individual is thus reinforced sometimes for seeking closeness and sometimes not. The anxiously attached individual then becomes increasingly demanding to force the attachment figure's attention, love and support. This can create relationship conflict and emotional distress. Individuals who are anxiously attached worry about rejection and abandonment. When the attachment figure is generally rejecting and unavailable then an insecure attachment classified as "avoidant" develops. The

individual then learns to hide or suppress their needs and generally tends to avoid having to rely on others. These individuals, thus, tend to avoid closeness with others.

Insecure attachment has been found to be related to various factors of psychological distress, including depression (Armsden, McCauley, Greenberg, Burke, & Mitchell, 1990; Graham & Easterbrooks, 2000; Kobak & Sceery, 1988; Kobak, Sudler & Gamble, 1991), personality and anxiety disorders (West, Rose, & Sheldon, 1993), and disruptive behavior disorders (e.g., Greenberg, Speltz, DeKlyen & Endriga, 1991; Troy & Sroufe, 1987).

Secure attachment has been found to be related to subjective well-being, high self-esteem, and well-adjusted interpersonal cognitions and behaviors (see Collins & Allard, 2001; Mikulincer & Florian, 2001, for reviews). Further, the self-regulation process differs according to attachment styles (Fuendeling, 1998), and attachment theory has been related to reactions to others' needs (Mikulincer, Gillath, Halevy, Avihou, Avidan, & Eshkoli, 2001). Indeed, the capacity to build trust with others inherent in secure attachments can have far-reaching consequences for business performance (e.g., Burchell & Wilkinson, 1997; Gupta, Choudhary, & Alam, 2014; Hill, 1995).

2.3 Attachment and Workplace Bullying

As noted above, individuals' attachment impacts both their psychological state as well as their behavior. More specifically, as it relates to bullying behavior, insecure attachments have been linked to externalizing (e.g., aggression) and internalizing (e.g., anxiety and depression) behaviors in children and adolescents. Attachment difficulty occurs when there is a lack of emotional closeness to the child (Abiden, 1995) with insecurely attached individuals showing higher rates of behavioral issues due to increased levels of anger, mistrust, and chaos (Greenberg & Speltz, 1988; Shaw & Bell, 1993; Sroufe & Fleeson, 1986). Children who are not securely attached do not have the opportunity to learn empathy and thus, tend to exhibit higher levels of childhood aggression (Lyons-Ruth, Alpern, & Repacholi, 1983). Indeed, in a study on parental stress, parents who reported attachment difficulties also reported that their children exhibited psychopathic traits, specifically narcissistic and callous/unemotional features (Fite, Greening & Stoppelbein, 2008). A basis for developing empathy for others is a secure attachment with the caregiver (Fite, et al., 2008). Thus, a failure to have a secure attachment to the caregiver, can lead to aggression and psychopathic-like traits as well as internalizing symptoms, such as depression and anxiety.

Attachment security or insecurity has been related to how individuals regulate intimacy-related affect and how they manage stress (Fuendeling, 1998; Mikulincer, Shaver, & Pereg, 2003; Wei, Vogel, Ku, and Zakalik, 2005). In addition, interpersonal conflict and conflict management have been found to be related to attachment style (Creasey and Hesson-McInnis, 2001; Lopez, Gover, Leskela, Sauer, Schirmer, and Wyssmann, 1997; Pistole and Arricale, 2003). Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) found that the type of attachment insecurity affected the type of interpersonal problems, with those who reported anxious attachments having excessive sensitivity to criticism and those reporting avoidant attachments having problems of aggression.

Further, insecure avoidant attachment has been found to predict teacher ratings of behavior problems for disadvantaged high-risk preschoolers (Sroufe, 1983). Individuals who use avoidance to cope with stress are assumed to have underlying anger (Main and Weston, 1982). The insecure avoidant attachment style is related to problems with hostility and aggression (Cummings-Robeau, Lopez, and Rice, 2009). Avoidant

attachment has been linked to the projection of unwanted self-traits onto others (Mikulincer, 1998; Mikulincer and Horesh, 1999). In a study of male undergraduates, Bookwala and Zdaniuk (1998) found that insecure avoidant attachment was related to coercive sexual behavior. Those who have insecure avoidant attachments are likely to exhibit active bullying behavior as they project their own anger and hostility onto others.

A high level of attachment anxiety has been found to be related to emotional reactive behaviors (Wei et al., 2005), excessive reassurance seeking (Davila, 2001; Wearden, Perryman, & Ward, 2006), and hypersensitivity (Weems, Berman, Silverman, & Rodriguez, 2002). In a study by Williams & Kennedy (2012), females were found to exhibit more relational aggression when they had higher levels of attachment anxiety with their mothers. Insecure anxious attachment was also found to be related to experiences of intense anger and those individuals tended to ruminate on their anger (Mikulincer, 1998). Thus, insecure anxious attachment is likely to lead to more passive aggressive bullying behaviors. Both styles of insecure attachment, then, are likely to lead to bullying behavior, although it may be more overt with avoidant attachment and more covert with anxious attachment.

2.4 Self-Esteem

Although various definitions of self-esteem exist, the construct is generally agreed to be a person's evaluation of the self. In addition, most agree that individuals are motivated to maintain a high level of self-esteem and to defend it when threatened (Pyszczynski, Solomon, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel, 2004). Research has indicated that there is a buffering effect of self-esteem on anxiety when an individual is exposed to a threat (Greenberg, Solomon, et al. 1992). Self-esteem is negatively correlated with anxiety and positively correlated with successful coping and good mental health.

Studies have found that self-esteem can be increased or enhanced (e.g., King, Vidouiek, Davis & McClellan, 2002; McVey, Davis, Tweed, & Shaw, 2004). These fluctuations in state self-esteem can have powerful affective consequences (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Wolfe & Crocker, 2003). Increases to state self-esteem are highly motivating, thus individuals pursue these boosts in self-esteem especially in domains in which their self-worth is invested (Crocker, Karpinski, Quinn, & Chase, 2003; Crocker, Sommers, & Luhtanen, 2002; Crocker & Wolfe, 2001).

The sociometer theory of self-esteem (Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995) suggests that self-esteem is a gauge of an individual's perceived relational value. Thus, individual with high self-esteem feel valued by others and those low in self-esteem question their value as a relationship partner. Low self-esteem is associated with social anxiety, friendship problems, social alienation, and perceived social mistreatment even when controlling for demographics variables including sex, ethnicity, neuroticism, social desirability and narcissism (Crocker & Luhtanen, 2003; Leary, 1983). Further, social rejection, disapproval, or lack of interest from others reduces state self-esteem (e.g., Leary et al., 1995; Nezlek, Kowalski, Leary, Blevins, & Holgate, 1997) and one's perception of their social value in the eyes of others predicts their level of self-esteem over time (Srivastava & Beer, 2005).

2.5 Self-Esteem, Bullying, and Attachment

A child's need fulfillment is dependent on parental responses. Thus, children learn to get their needs met, receive love, and lower their anxiety when they live up to parental standards of goodness (Pyszczynski, et al., 2004). Thus, a child's positive sense of self is dependent upon meeting a parent's perception of value. In this way, the child's anxiety is lessened and sense of self-esteem is enhanced. Indeed, research has indicated that threats to self-esteem arouse anxiety along with a wide variety of cognitive and behavioral defense mechanisms (Arndt & Goldenberg, 2002), which serve to reduce the anxiety.

Warm and supportive parenting practices have been linked to high self-esteem (Harter, 1990; Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, & Dornbusch, 1991). Indeed, secure attachments have been found to be positively related to representations of the self, including high levels of self-esteem (Arbona & Power, 2003). Further, self-worth has been suggested to be associated with specific attachment styles in adulthood (Mischel & Morf, 2003), such that children believe that their worth as a person depends on being or doing certain things (Park, Crocker, & Mickelson, 2004). Failure to achieve goals that are linked to self-esteem has been related to drops in state self-esteem and increases in anger, sadness and shame (Crocker & Park, 2004). Further, when self-worth is threatened, feelings of shame occur, which can bring on defensive, retaliatory anger, or a state of humiliated fury (Averill, 1982). Researchers have argued that individuals pursue self-esteem to assist in managing their fears and anxieties (Crocker & Park, 2004). In fact, individuals who pursue self-validation across various situations tend to be high in anxiety (Dykman, 1988). Anxiety can be temporarily reduced when individuals are successful in validating their intrinsic selves (Schimel, Arndt, Pyszezynski, & Greenberg, 2001).

Self-esteem has been found to be significantly related to attachment, with securely attached individuals having higher self-esteem than those who exhibit insecure attachments (Huntsinger & Luecken, 2004). Huntsinger and Luecken (2004) also found that self-esteem mediates the relationship between health behavior and attachment style with higher self-esteem positively related to health behaviors. A study of adult attachment and depression found that attachment style was associated with self-esteem and depressive symptoms (Roberts, Gotlib, & Kassel, 1996). Results indicated that insecure adult attachment is associated with dysfunctional attitudes, which in turn predispose an individual to lower self-esteem. This depletion in self-esteem then acts as a more proximal cause of depression, thus self-esteem mediates the relationship between attachment and depression. Further, global self-esteem has been found to be significantly and negatively related to bullying behavior in children (O'Moore & Kirkham, 2001). Thus, children who are victims, bully-victims (those who both bully and are bullied by others), and pure bullies have lower self-esteem than children who are uninvolved in bullying.

2.6 Empathy

Empathy is the feelings one individual has towards the experiences of another (Davis, 1983). Since the 1700s (Smith, 1759) individuals have distinguished between two broad categories of empathy, a cognitive or intellectual reaction and a more emotional reaction. Davis (1983) distinguished between perspective taking or the ability to take on the psychological perspective of another and empathic concern or experiencing "other-oriented" feelings of sympathy and concern for others' adversities. Empathy can be conceptualized as state-like or trait-like, as delineated by Duan and Hill (1996) as a

"situation-specific cognitive-affective state" or "dispositional empathy" (p. 262). Evidence exists for stable trait-level individual differences in empathic concern (i.e., tendency to consider others' feelings) and perspective taking (i.e., tendency to entertain others' points of view (Davis, 1983).

2.7 Empathy, Bullying, and Attachment

Bowlby (1969) argued that attachment theory, although mainly dealing with others' responses to the individual's needs, might also have relevance when considering how the individual reacts to others' needs. Researchers and theorists have noted that interaction with peers (e.g., Kruger & Tomasello, 1986; Piaget, 1932) and siblings (e.g., Jiao, Ji, & Jing, 1986) plays a role in the decline of egocentrism as a child matures. Further, parenting practices which encourage the child to think about the effect of his or her behaviors on others, as opposed to power assertive behaviors, are thought to help in the development of empathy (Hoffman, 1994). Thus, sensitive and responsive parenting, which fosters secure attachments, has been found to be related to the development of empathy (Mikulincer, Gillath & Halevy, 2001) as well as compassionate and altruistic responding toward others (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005).

Empathy has been found to impact close relationships in various ways. Adolescents who demonstrate higher levels of empathy show higher interpersonal competence, less aggressiveness, and less friendship conflicts than adolescents with lower levels of empathy (Worthen, 2000). Research has indicated that empathy is an important predictor of marital adjustment with the lack of empathy a predictor for divorce in married couples (Long & Andrews, 1990). As might be expected, attachment anxiety and avoidance were found to be negatively related to empathy (Mikulincer, Gillath, Halevy, Avihou, Avidan, & Eshkoli, 2001).

The affective and cognitive dimensions of empathy have been labelled empathic concern and perspective taking. Empathic concern, or other-oriented feelings of sympathy or concern for others undergoing adversity, has been linked to helping behavior and altruism (Oswald, 1996). Perspective taking, or the ability to consider the perspective of someone else, is noted to be a major developmental breakthrough in cognitive functioning (Piaget, 1932) as well as important in moral reasoning (Kohlberg, 1976). Perspective taking has been found to be positively correlated with both social competence and self-esteem (Davis, 1983), as well as altruism (Batson, 1991, 1998). Low levels of perspective taking has been linked to social anxiety, shyness, and an arrogant, inconsiderate interpersonal style (Davis, 1983).

Since bullying is a type of aggression, the relationship of empathy to aggressive behavior is important to understand. However, the association between aggression and empathy is not clear (Caravita, Di Blasio, & Salmivalli, 2009). Some studies have found empathy to be negatively related to aggressiveness with empathy inhibiting or mitigating aggressive behavior (Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987; Kaukiainen, Björkqvist, K., Lagerspetz, K., Österman, K., Salmivalli, C., Rothberg, S., et al., 1999; Kaukiainen, Björkqvist, Österman, & Lagerspetz, 1996; Richardson, Hammock, Smith, Gardner, & Signo, 1994), while others have found no relationship or only a weak relationship (for a meta-analysis, see Miller & Eisenberg, 1988). However, in one study, empathy was found to be related to bullying behavior among adolescents, with empathy interacting with social status variables to predict bullying behavior (Caravita, Di Blasio, & Salmivalli, 2009). In this study, high levels of affective empathy inhibited bullying only among adolescent boys,

but not adolescent girls. However, the cognitive component of empathy was found to be positively associated with adolescent bullying.

3. PROPOSITIONS

Given the discussion above, the following propositions are suggested:

Proposition 1: Individuals with secure attachments will exhibit less workplace bullying behavior than those with insecure attachments.
Proposition 2: Individuals with secure attachments will exhibit higher levels of self-esteem than those with insecure attachments.
Proposition 3: Individuals with secure attachments will exhibit higher levels of empathic concern and perspective taking than those with insecure attachments.
Proposition 4: Individuals with higher levels of self-esteem will exhibit lower levels of bullying behavior than those with low self-esteem.
Proposition 5: Individuals with higher levels of empathic concern and perspective taking will exhibit lower levels of bullying behavior than those will lower levels of empathic concern and perspective taking.
Proposition 6a: Self-esteem will moderate the relationship between secure attachment style and bullying behavior, such that the effects are stronger when higher levels of self-esteem are present.
Proposition 6b: Self-esteem will moderate the relationship between insecure attachment style and bullying behavior, such that the effects are weaker when higher levels of self-esteem are present.
Proposition 7a: Empathic concern and perspective taking will moderate the relationship between secure attachment and bullying behavior such that the effects are stronger when higher levels of empathic concern and perspective taking are present.
Proposition 7b: Empathic concern and perspective taking will moderate the relationship between insecure attachment and bullying behavior such that the effects are weaker the higher levels of empathic concern and perspective taking are present.

4. CONCLUSION

Workplace bullying behavior is a significant and growing concern for people in organizations. This paper describes a model in which bullying behavior is dependent on attachment style, with the relationship between these two variables being moderated by self-esteem as well as empathic concern and perspective taking. Managers need to understand bullying behavior and then take action to eliminate or reduce it from the workforce to ensure the negative effects of bullying do not accrue to employees or the organization itself. To create a culture free from workplace bullying, organization would do well to consider both an individual's attachment style as well as their self-esteem and empathic reactions.

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