

The role of the psychosocial safety climate in coping with workplace bullying: A grounded theory and sequential tree analysis

Abstract

Workplace bullying is a severe workplace stressor that affects both employees and organizations. Despite a wealth of research of the prevalence of workplace bullying and its correlates, little research has been done on the process of bullying. In a qualitative study, based on the grounded theory approach, we examine the role of psychosocial safety climate (PSC) in influencing employees' coping strategies and ultimately the escalation of bullying. Interviews were conducted with 20 Malaysian workers from various organizational settings, who also completed a 12-item PSC scale. The analysis revealed that coping strategies took the form of a modified exit-voice-loyalty-neglect (EVLN) model, whereby acquiescence replaced loyalty in the matrix. In turn, five escalation patterns of bullying were identified, linked to the coping options used by employees. We found that employees tended to voice in high PSC contexts, which led to swift resolution of bullying. In low PSC contexts, employees tended to neglect or acquiesce before exiting the organization because the bullying remained unresolved, which was revealed in four different trajectories of escalation without resolution. These results emphasize the influence of the organizational climate for psychosocial safety in shaping the coping options available to bullied workers, and the likely success of these strategies.