“I Can’t Believe This Is Happening”
Social Workers’ Responses to Workplace Bullying

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“. . . When you are in a social services organization . . . you don’t really don’t expect people to be malicious, because you feel like you’re already making concessions to work there in terms of salary, . . . so you expect to find a group of people who are different. I expect to have backstabbers and those types of people in corporate settings, but in a social service setting, it kind of caught me off guard . . . ”

Social Worker

Social Work Has a Role in Addressing Workplace Problems

- Do social workers have the necessary skills to address hostile workplace environments?
- Are social workers themselves victimized in the workplace?

Study Focus

- Perceptions about Bullying Work Relationships
- Coping Responses to Perceived Bullying
- Effectiveness of Coping Responses in Addressing Perceived Bullying

Mixed Methodology

- Quantitative
  - Random, mail survey sample of social workers in metropolitan Washington, DC area
- Qualitative
  - In-depth interviews with two self-identified targets of bullying

Quantitative Sampling

- A disproportionate, stratified sample was randomly drawn from the membership of the NASW Metro Chapter
  - Gender
  - Organizational setting
  - Employment status
- Sample size = 317
Instrumentation

- A survey instrument drawing on two existing instruments was developed
  - Generalized Workplace Harassment Scale (Richman et al., 1999)
  - Coping Response Scale (Cortina, Magley & Lim, 2002)

Response

- 171 surveys returned (54%)
- 111 cases included in analysis (35%)

FINDINGS

Percentage of Sample Identified as Targets of Bullying

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sample (n=111)</th>
<th>Targets (n=64)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not Targets of Bullying</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
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<td>Targets of Bullying</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>42%</td>
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Sample vs. Target Characteristics

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sample (n=111)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>59%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Caucasian/White</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian American</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>MSW</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Govt/Military</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outpt Mental Health</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinical Practice</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admin/Mangmt</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>29%</td>
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Roles of Bullies

- Supervisors: 50%
- Colleagues: 30%
- Clients: 12%
- Subordinates: 8%

Bully Characteristics (n=60)

- 60% were Caucasian/White
- 35% were African American/Black
- < 2% were Other Ethnicities
- Women (67%) were more than twice as likely to be identified as bullies as men (33%)

Most Troubling Bullying Behaviors

- Verbal Hostility
  - Gossiped About You (13%)
  - Talked Down to You (13%)
  - Humiliated/Belittled You (11%)
  - Treated or Evaluated You Less (9%)
- Covert Hostility
  - Ignored You or Work Contribution (9%)

Coping Responses

- Pro-Social
- Minimization
- Seeking Informal Organizational Support
- Overt Resistance
- Passive Assertive

Pro-Social Coping Strategies

- Avoid negative interactions with the instigator and enlist social support from trusted others
**Coping Responses**

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<td>88%</td>
<td>12%</td>
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**Minimization Coping Strategies**

- **Minimization**
  - **Passive**
    - Tell yourself it wasn't important: 50% passive, 50% assertive
    - Assume the person meant no harm: 55% passive, 45% assertive
    - Just try to forget it: 62% passive, 38% assertive
    - Just ignore it: 68% passive, 32% assertive
  - **Assertive**

**Seeking Informal Organizational Support Coping Strategies**

- **Involve informal discussions with or reports to management**

**Overt Resistance Coping Strategies**

- **Direct, vocal, opposition to the situation or instigator either by verbal confrontation with the instigator or formal complaint to the organization**

**Pro-Social**

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<td>Confront the person</td>
<td>34%</td>
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<td>Ask the person to leave you alone</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make a formal complaint</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>97%</td>
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Effectiveness of Coping Responses

- Did the coping response...
  - Lessen the frequency of the behavior?
  - Increase the frequency of the behavior?
  - Make no difference?
- Despite the coping response used, the modal response was **MADE NO DIFFERENCE**

Qualitative Findings

- Bullying as a Series of Events
- Characteristics of the Bullies
- Most Troubling Behaviors
- Influence of the Organization’s Structure

Individual Reactions to the Bullying

Use of Multiple Coping Responses

Role of Race and Gender

Organizational Responses

Expectations About Working in a Social Work Context

“I expect clients to be inappropriate at times, but it is more disturbing when you are singled out unfairly by a superior in front of others.”

Social Worker

“Somehow we’re supposed to be able to extend humanity and courtesy to our clients, but that it didn’t translate to how staff were treated.”

Social Worker
Study Limitations

- This study's design had limited external validity
- Design of survey instrument may have limited full participation

Conclusion

- The experiences of bullied social workers deserves attention
  - Risks for individual social workers and their families
  - Organizations face increased costs
  - Vulnerable populations

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