

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Workplace Bullying and Turnover Intention. The Role of Protective versus Vulnerable Personality Factors

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Abstract

This study investigates the vulnerability/protection effects of the Big Five personality traits (extraversion, openness, agreeability, conscientiousness, neuroticism) on the relationship between bullying and turnover intention. Specifically, based on the assumption of Vulnerability-Stress Model we propose that bullying will predict turnover intention and that this relationship will increase or decrease in accordance with one's level of certain personality traits. We collected a convenience sample of 460 employees. Results of the moderation analysis suggests that bullied employees, as an attempt to coping are more inclined to turnover intentions, as preceded suggested by literature. Furthermore, out of all 5 factors, solely extraversion and agreeableness acts like a protective factor.

Keywords

Vulnerability Stress Model, bullying, turnover intentions, Extraversion, Agreeableness

There are numerous conceptualizations of bullying at work, but they all refer to the same phenomenon, namely: one or more employees in an organization experiencing direct or indirect systematic aggression, involving repeated incidents or a pattern of negative behaviors, over a longer period of time (at least one incident per week, over a period of

six months) where the targeted victim cannot easily escape from the given situation (Leymann, 1996; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018). The concept of bullying emerged quite recently, but is already a well-researched topic. The International Labour Office (ILO, 1996) has shown that violence at the workplace is extensive around the globe, with

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France, Argentina, Romania, Canada and England reporting the highest rates of harassment in organizations. Prevalence rates have been estimated meta-analytically at about 15% of global employees (Nielsen et al., 2010).

The research interest in bullying is driven not only by its high prevalence, but also by its effects. The most direct effects of bullying are felt by the employees who are experiencing the aggression (e.g., effects on adequate communication, social interactions, personal reputation, professional situation, physical health; Leymann, 1996). The consequences of bullying are also in the organization itself: bullying fosters harmful phenomena in organizational contexts, such as increased absenteeism (Devonish, 2013), turnover (Coetzee & van Dyk, 2017), decreased productivity and organizational performance (Yildirim, 2009; Elçi, Erdilek, Alpkan & Şenerd, 2014).

Workplace Bullying and Turnover Intention

Workplace bullying is associated, especially at higher rates, with turnover intentions (Coetzee & van Dyk, 2018; Hoel & Copper, 2000). Turnover intention is distinct from, and precedes, actual turnover. Turnover intention refers to a subjective appraisal of the employee, regarding the likelihood of leaving the organization in the near future (Cho, 2009). Studying turnover intentions has a number of benefits; most importantly, at the moment when an employee is beginning to consider leaving the organization, there may still be time for corrective measures. We therefore focus in the present study on turnover intentions.

Turnover intention is influenced by a variety of factors (person-organization-fit/person-job-fit; Hassan, Akram, & Naz, 2012; lack of career opportunities; Chen, Chang, & Yeh, 2004; hard working conditions; Cottini, Kato, & Westergaard-Nielsen, 2011 etc.) but is mainly related to the interpersonal aspects of the job, for instance, the relationship between employees and their direct manager or coworkers. Acts of incivility, such as misunderstandings, teasing and conflicts can lead to bullying, increasing

the risk of turnover intention (Glabek, Matthiesen, Hetland, & Einarsen, 2014; Rahim, & Cosby, 2016). The underlying mechanism is based on resignation as an instance of positive coping: leaving the organization eliminates the negative factor in one's personal and professional life (Hogh et al., 2011; Zapf & Gross, 2001), and in fact the literature on bullying interventions at work shows that, as a last resort, resigning may be convenient for individuals (Zapf & Gross, 2011). Following the results of previous studies and based on the mechanism described above, we first hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 1: Bullying is a predictor for turnover intention.

The Role of Personality Traits

The innovative contribution we bring to the literature is the investigation of the moderating effects of broad personality traits, that may increase or decrease the effects of bullying on turnover intention. Individual differences are acknowledged in their capacity to explain workplace behaviors, such as performance, counterproductive behaviors and civic behaviors etc. Turnover specifically has been related to personality traits in the past, but the relationships found were not significant (Zimmerman, 2008). In their meta-analysis, Barrick and Mount (1991) found fairly weak evidence for personality factors as predictors for turnover intention, reporting effect sizes between .20 for emotional stability and .12 for conscientiousness. These small effects suggest that, if personality traits are related in any way to turnover, the relationship may be based on an intervening and not on a direct effect; in fact one of the mandatory conditions of a valid moderation consists of the dependent variable having only a weak or insignificant relationship with the moderator variable. We therefore consider that personality traits could act as moderators in the relationship between workplace bullying and turnover intention.

In order to expand and test this hypothesis we have used Five-Factor Model of personality, which is arguably the most robust model of personality – or at the very least the most used in contemporary personality research (Caspi, Roberts, & Shiner, 2007).

The five broad traits of neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness and conscientiousness have to date not been considered as moderators in the relationship between workplace bullying and turnover intention in the past, but have been investigated predictors both of turnover intentions, and of bullying, e.g. by focusing on the portrait of those individuals who are likely to become perpetrators (Van Geel, Goemans, Toprak, & Vedder, 2017), or victims (Glaso, Matthiesen, Nielsen, & Einersen, 2007) of bullying.

One of the theoretical frames that offer credibility to our hypothesis that personality traits may act as moderators in this relationship is the Vulnerability-Stress Model (McKeever & Huff, 2003). The Vulnerability-Stress Model proposes that individual characteristics may act as vulnerability and risk factors, but also as protective factors, in one's response to harmful environmental events (stressors). In this regard, personality traits are seen as broad vulnerability or protective factors (Iliescu, Macinga, Sulea, Fischmann, Elst & De Witte, 2017). In this context, we consider that each of the five personality traits could attenuate, or as an amplifier of the relationship between workplace bullying and turnover intention. We will outline in the next sections the most likely explanatory mechanisms for these effects.

Neuroticism as a moderator. Individuals with a higher level of neuroticism typically tend to have unfavorable opinions about themselves and, generally, about the world (Watson & Clark, 1984). Simultaneously, they are prone to feel negative emotions, such as dissatisfaction, anxiety, anger (Hogh, Mikkelsen, & Hansen, 2010). Establishing this tendency, from a mental health point of view, neuroticism is often seen as a factor that could determine one to behave in a more vulnerable manner (Iliescu et. al, 2017). At the same time, when confronted with workplace bullying, high neuroticism may determine the victim to take firm or extreme action in order to withdraw from the situation. Individuals high on neuroticism could therefore be more responsive and prone to self-defense, while

individuals low on neuroticism may be less likely to choose to extract themselves from the situation, by quitting their jobs. We therefore propose that:

Hypothesis 2a: Neuroticism will act as a protective factor for the individual, by strengthening the relationship between workplace bullying and turnover intention.

Extraversion as a moderator. People higher on extraversion are prone to have more contacts within and outside the organization, and more varied professional alternatives (Zimmerman, 2018). Research has shown that extraverts socialize more intensively inside the organization and adapt more easily to the organizational culture (McCrae, & Costa, 1997), being therefore perceived as less susceptible to turnover intentions (Maertz, & Campion, 2004; Zimmerman, 2008). Nonetheless, when confronted with bullying, their social skills may be less effective; given their demand for positive social interactions exiting the organization may allow extraverts more prospects to develop positive relationships. We therefore propose that:

Hypothesis 2b: Extraversion will act as a protective factor for the individual, by strengthening the relationship between workplace bullying and turnover intention.

Openness to experience as a moderator. Maertz and Griffeth (2004) advocate that people high on openness to experience may be more eager to experience new jobs and explore new perspectives, and therefore would be more prone to leave the current organization, irrespective of how they perceive their work (Zimmerman, 2008). Out of all the five personality traits discussed here, openness to experience is the one that is most frequently related turnover, even in favorable conditions. Individuals high on openness will likely only be more eager to leave when confronted with adverse conditions, while more conventional individuals (low on openness) may have difficulties leaving their familiar environment, even if this context is appalling. We therefore propose that:

Hypothesis 2c: Openness will act as a protective factor for the individual by strengthening the relationship between workplace bullying and turnover intention.

Agreeableness as a moderator.

Individual wellbeing is affected by workplace conflicts (Dijkstra, Dierendonck, Evers, & De Dreu, 2005), which suggests that people who are high on agreeableness will more easily leave the organization when consistently exposed to interpersonal harassment. Previous studies (Priyadarshini, 2017) have shown that agreeableness has a significant and positive association with avoidant coping in conflict situation ($\beta = 0.17$, $p < .05$), and leaving the organization may be a probable route through which individuals high on agreeableness may avoid the conflict and the aggressor in order to protect themselves. Low agreeableness is characterized by toughness, persistence and aggressiveness and with a strong preference for using a confronting coping style; previous research has shown that participants low on agreeableness are more likely to rate power tactics as their preferred method of managing conflict (Grazziano, Jensen-Campbell, & Hair, 1996). In this case, individuals low on agreeableness may rather engage directly with the bully, leading to an escalation of the conflict but not to voluntary turnover. We therefore propose that:

Hypothesis 2d: Agreeableness will act as a protective factor for the individual by strengthening the relationship between workplace bullying and turnover intention.

Conscientiousness as a moderator.

Employees who are high on conscientiousness are generally less likely to resign their job, and we consider this to be the case also in the specific context of bullying. Watson, Clark, and Harkness (1994) have highlighted the fact that people high on conscientiousness are less inclined to act impulsively or spontaneously and may therefore take a longer time before considering leaving the organization when confronted with workplace difficulties, such as bullying. An additional explanation for the persistence of individuals who are high on conscientiousness is their preference for their task-oriented coping styles; they may be more inclined to focus more on the job than on personal relationships when confronted with adversity. We therefore propose that:

Hypothesis 2e: Conscientiousness will attenuate the relationship between workplace bullying and turnover intention.

Method

Sample and Procedure

The data used in this study was collected using three online platforms. Adult age and a minimum of six month of job experience with the same organization were the only criteria of inclusion. We collected a convenience sample of 460 employees (67% female). The age of the participants varies from 18 to 57 years ($M = 32.1$, $SD = 10.3$), 57.4% have graduate studies, 18.3% have post-graduate studies and 24.3% have high school studies. A significant part (75.5%) work in private institutions and the rest in public institutions.

Measures

Workplace bullying. The NAQ-R scale (Einarsen, Ståle, Høel, Helge, & Notelaers, 2009) was used for measuring workplace bullying. This questionnaire contains 22 items related to different workplace behaviors and is divided into 3 dimensions: person-related bullying (e.g., “Having your opinions ignored”), workplace-related bullying (e.g., “Someone withholding information which affects your performance”) and physically intimidating bullying (e.g., “Being shouted at or being the target of spontaneous anger”). The Cronbach Alpha coefficient for this scale is .90.

Turnover Intention. The Turnover Intention Scale (Bentein, Vandenberghe, Vandenberg & Stinglhamber, 2005) consists of 2 items, that measure the desire to leave the organization in prospect (“I often think about giving up the organization for which I currently work”, “I intend to look for a job with another employer next year”). The items are rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strong disagreement, 5 = strong agreement). The Cronbach Alpha coefficient for this scale is .86.

Personality Traits. The Big Five Inventory-2 Short Form Scale (BFI-2; Soto & John, 2017) was used to measure the five personality traits. It contains 30 items rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strong disagreement, 5 = strong agreement). Each factor consists of 6 items: Extraversion (“Is dominant, acts as a leader”, “Is full of energy); Agreeableness (“Is compassionate, has a soft

heart”, “Assumes the best about people”), Conscientiousness (“Is reliable, can always be counted on“, “Keeps things neat and tidy”), Negative Emotionality (“Worries a lot”, “Tends to feel depressed, blue”), Open-Mindedness (“Is fascinated about art, music, or literature”, “Is original, comes up with new ideas”). The Cronbach Alpha coefficients are .77, .75, .78, .84 and .77 for Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Negative Emotionality, and Open-Mindedness respectively.

Analytic Approach

A moderation analysis using the PROCESS macro in SPSS (Hayes, 2012), Model 1, with

5000 bootstrapped samples following the recommendations of Preacher and Hayes (2008) was performed to test the moderation effect. We chose to test the moderation hypotheses based on the significance of the interaction term and in case of significant moderators, we further analyzed the effect modification test of the difference between the simple slopes.

Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and the correlations between the study’s variables.

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics and correlations for the variables in study*

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
Workplace bullying	36.02	13.51	-	-	-	-	-	-
Turnover Intention	5.49	2.77	.44**	-	-	-	-	-
Extraversion	19.94	5.56	-.04	-.09*	-	-	-	-
Agreeableness	18.92	3.28	-.09*	-.10*	.22**	-	-	-
Conscientiousness	19.51	3.40	-.14**	-.06	.17**	.25*	-	-
Negative Emotionality	13.17	3.79	.16**	.16**	-.20**	-.23**	-.42*	-
Open Mindedness	18.55	3.31	-.01	.05	.09*	.06	.11**	-

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

To test the assumption that bullying predicts turnover intention (H1), the collected data was analyzed using a hierarchical linear regression. Multicollinearity tests have shown that the level of multicollinearity between variables was low (Tolerance = 1.00; VIF = 1.00). The data met the assumption of independent errors (Durbin-Warson Value= 1.89). It also met the assumption of non-zero variance (Bullying Scores, Variance= 182.76; Turnover Intention Scores, Variance= 7.70). Results indicated that bullying predicts turnover intention ($\Delta R^2 = .20$, $F(1,473) = 117.12$, $p < .00$).

Before computed the moderation analysis for testing H2-H6, following the recommendations of Aiken & West, 1991, variables were mean-centered before being entered in the analysis. To rule out alternative explanations (Carlson & Wu, 2012), gender

(0 = male, 1 = female) and age (in years) were included as control variables. In this particular case, gender is positively associated with negative emotionality ($r = .18$, $p < .01$; females have a higher tendency experiencing negative emotionality) and age relates positively with conscientiousness ($r = .15$, $p < .01$; older people tend to have higher conscientiousness scores), negatively with negative emotionality ($r = -.10$, $p < .01$; younger people have a higher tendency experiencing negative emotionality) and negatively with open mindedness ($r = -.14$, $p < .01$; younger people have higher scores at open mindedness). To demonstrate the unique relationship between model's variables, it is important to parse out the variance between these controls and our predictor variable.

As can be seen in Table 2, we found an effect of bullying and extraversion in

predicting turnover intention, $\beta = .007$, $\Delta R^2 = .05$, $p < .001$. The predictive value for the whole model regarding the explained variance of turnover intention is 26 %, while the increment of the interaction is 5%. To illustrate the bullying X extraversion interaction for turnover interaction, we computed the effect modification test (Hayes, 2012, 2017) in order to investigate slope

differences at different levels of the moderator (low, average and high), as presented in Table 3. The relationship between bullying and turnover intention is amplified as the level of extraversion is higher [$b = .14$, $t(470) = 11.87$, $p < 0.001$]. Similarly, at low levels of extraversion, the relationship between bullying and turnover intention was also relevant [$b = .06$, $t(470) = 6.15$, $p < 0.001$].

Table 2. Summary of the regression results for the moderating effect of bullying and Big Five personality factors on turnover intention

	Moderator (M)				
	E	A	C	N	O
Age	-.03	-.03*	-.03*	-.03	-.03*
Gender	-.13	-.07	-.11	-.21	-.10
IV	.10***	.10***	.09***	.09***	.09***
M	-.04	-.05	.01	.07	.03
IV x M	.007***	.011***	-.001	.000	-.002
R^2	.26***	.25***	.20***	.21***	.20***
ΔR^2	.05***	.03***	.00	.002	.001

Note. Table contains unstandardized betas. IV = Bullying, DV = Turnover intention, E= Extraversion, A= Agreeableness, C= Conscientiousness, N= Negative Emotionality, O= Open Mindedness. 95CI = 95% Confidence Interval at Step 3, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Gender was coded: 0 = male; 1 = female.

Table 3. Conditional effect of bullying on turnover intention at values of the significative moderators (Extraversion, Agreeableness)

Moderator	E				A			
	Values	Effect	SE	T	Values	Effect	SE	t
Low	-5.56	.06***	.01	6.15	-3.62	.06***	.01	5.13
Average	.00	.10***	.00	11.89	.00	.10**	.00	11.38
High	5.56	.14***	.02	11.87	3.62	.13***	.02	10.98

Note. E= Extraversion, A= Agreeableness. Values for moderators are the mean and plus/minus one SD from mean, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

For agreeableness, was found a similar pattern. The moderating effect of agreeableness on the relationship between bullying and turnover intention is $\beta = .010$, $\Delta R^2 = .03$, $p < .001$. Agreeableness as moderator brought up to 3 % in explaining the variability of turnover intention. As Table 3 shows, the relationship between bullying and turnover intentions is stronger as levels of

agreeableness is higher [$b = .13$, $t(470) = 10.98$, $p < 0.001$].

Results revealed that the interaction among bullying, and negative emotionality did not account for a significant proportion of the variance in turnover intention, $\beta = .000$, $\Delta R^2 = .002$, $p > .05$. In the case of conscientiousness, the interaction term with bullying also did not account for a significant portion of the

variance for turnover intention: $\beta = -.001$, $\Delta R^2 = .00$, $p > .05$. Finally, the interaction among bullying, and open mindedness also did not account for a significant proportion of the variance in intention to appeal, $\beta = -.002$, $\Delta R^2 = .001$, $p > .05$.

Discussion

The objective of this study was to establish the way personality traits influence one's desire to depart from the organization, due to bullying. This perspective has not yet been studied in the literature, previous studies referring to personality only as an antecedent of bullying, and as an antecedent of turnover intention. Based on the assumption of Vulnerability-Stress Model, personality traits could act as a protector or could enhance one's vulnerability due to stress (i.e., bullying in this context). In this paper, the role of vulnerability vs. protective has been related to the turnover intention criteria. To be precise, vulnerability refers to the employee's incapacity to remain stuck in the current position (i.e., being bullied), whereas protective outlines one's determination to bring about change. We learn from previous studies that, due to perpetual bullying, by that time, the affected employee is trying to unsuccessfully cope with the situation. Moreover, specialists conclude that leaving the organization may be the foremost alternative.

The results were partly confirmed. As expected, the first hypothesis was confirmed. Specifically, bullied employees, as an attempt to coping are more inclined to turnover intentions, as preceded suggested by literature. Moreover, when we examine the extent to which this relationship is influenced by personality factors, present results show that exclusively two traits have a small contribution, namely extraversion and agreeableness. Notably about these results is that, although the mentioned factors evidently capture other aspects of human behavior, out of all 5 factors, solely extraversion and agreeableness consist, at their core, of aspects as social interactions/interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, both traits could be located within the interpersonal circumplex (Trapnell & Wiggins, 1990), which is defined

by two orthogonal axes labeled as dominance-agency and nurturance-communion. Whereas extraversion reflects a mixture of dominance and nurturance, agreeableness dwells primarily on nurturance (Tov, Nai, & Lee, 2014). In addition, it is comprehensible that both extroverted and highly agreeable individuals need positive relationships, however this specific aspect is threatened by bullying situations. As follows, they might come to think about changing the social context, by resigning from the workplace.

Extraversion is neither in this study ($r = -.04$) nor in previous studies related to the proclivity of bullying, on the contrary, not only by having better social skills (Festa, McNamara Barry, Sherman, & Grover, 2012), but also by possessing the tendency to generally experience pleasant affects (Wilt & Revelle, 2009), extraverts aim to evoke more positive reactions from others than introverts (Eaton & Funder, 2003). Nonetheless, according to the present results, extraverts who are experiencing acts of bullying are put in contexts that does not allow them to benefit from interpersonal exchanges, so they tend to resign, or at least to have turnover intentions. Moreover, extraverts are described as interested in having high social impact (Tobin, Graziano, Vannman, & Tassinari, 2000) and being victims in bullying situations, social impact is certainly inefficient or negative. In short, from this perspective, extroverts do not have the opportunity nor the audience to express themselves, meaning they cannot dominate the interactions. Hereby, extraversion acts like a protective factor.

Similar to extravert individuals, high agreeableness is negatively related to bullying ($r = -.09^*$), meaning that they usually are not target of the bullying behavior, *au contraire*. This may be explained by their nature: people who score high on the agreeableness scale have been described as likable, pleasant, and responsive to the needs of others (Graziano & Tobin, 2009) and primarily concerned with maintaining positive relationships with the rest. Present results indicate that it is very unlikely for agreeable people to respond to social conflict in any other way than withdrawing from the respective circumstance. Thus, their agreeableness acts

rather as a protective factor by not exposing themselves as the target of aggression anymore, by leaving or thinking about leaving the organization. In the current study, the other personality factors did not reveal that they would make any contribution in explaining turnover intention in bullying situations.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

In a recent exhaustive review of workplace bullying, Nielsen & Einarsen (2018) conclude that scientific studies in the field of workplace bullying have resulted in addressing an important social problem, rather than as the result of purely academic and theoretical interest, theories guiding workplace bullying research are therefore relatively few and far between. In order to move the field forward, it is necessary to further integrate established theories for adjacent research. Thus, main theoretical contribution of our research concerns the usability of a theoretical framework, Vulnerability-Stress Model, in the literature dedicated to bullying. The model provides an explanatory framework for which certain personality traits could not only contribute to the relationship between bullying and turnover, but also can provide a practical benchmark. Among the most important practical contribution of this study is the watch out signal that can be drawn related to a possible risk category of personnel. If someone refers to the previous results in the literature, we know that both agreeableness and extraversion are negatively correlated with bullying - meaning that they are not predisposed to be victims in such a context, which can be reassuring for organizational management. Also, if we look at the previous results between personality and turnover intention, ones with high agreeableness scores are rather loyal to the organization, and extraverts are rather attached to their interpersonal relationships, a conclusion which again, could lead to the thought that, from a managerial perspective, there should be no concerns from the standpoint of turnover. This study adds to the literature targeting on the context in which of the two categories could be considered a risk of leaving, i.e., when they are bullied.

Limits and Future Direction

Although our results might be explained by using theoretical arguments (e.g., the lack of social impact in the context of bullying of extraverts and respectively the inability to nourish the need for positive relationships as part of bullying of the agreeable employees), it would still be an advance to empirically test the present model, by placing out theoretical arguments as mediators.

All studies that are considering intentions, rather than behaviors, are considered limited from this point of view. Although it is important to study the intention, as we have argued, primarily because, at that moment, organizational management still has time to interfere, meta-analyses have reported correlations between turnover intentions and actual turnover, in the range of 0.35–0.38 (Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000; Jiang, Liu, McKay, Lee, & Mitchell, 2012), meaning that it is possible that the effects of personality, as it happens real turnover, may be larger, smaller, or have other significance, accordingly further studies should also take into account the turnover behavior. However, we are compelled to mention that even in the event of personality factors acting differently in the context of turnover behavior versus turnover intention, present contribution would not be invalidated. Just thinking about leaving the workplace is itself an anxiogenic experience, which should be addressed by the upper management.

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